

5 Detective NOVELS

Magazine

25¢ FALL

FEATURING

MAN SINISTER

By TALMAGE POWELL

**THIS WAY TO THE
MORGUE**

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

THE LONG NIGHT

By WILLIAM GAULT

KINDLY OMIT FLOWERS

By STEWART STERLING

THE MURDER FRAME

By DAY KEENE



A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



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5 Detective NOVELS

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FALL, 1952

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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the LOWDOWN

ON BURGLARY TECHNIQUE



THE police flyer bore the photograph-ic reproduction of a meaty-faced young man with arrogant eyes and a face you'd be likely to remember. The profile view, which didn't show the insolence in the eyes, might have been that of the man next you in the crowded bus or at the fountain in the drugstore.

Given the customary disguise of a low-brimmed hat, perhaps a pair of steel-rimmed glasses, and a cigar to alter the shape of the pursy mouth, it would have taken an expert at identification to place him as Sandor K——, wanted for burglary and atrocious assault.

The plainclothes lieutenant tapped the bulletin significantly. "You wouldn't want to bump into him unexpectedly in a dark room," he said. "He beat the face off a woman in Glen View six weeks ago; she's still in the hospital. But he's got more than an ugly disposition; he's got a technique."

A Daytime Man

I read about that in the fine type under the criminal's description:

This man specializes in breaking and entering apartments and houses in the daytime when the occupants are absent. He usually drives to the home in a battered pick-up truck. Wearing the white coveralls of a mechanic or carpenter, he always carries a long metal tool box in which he later conceals any stolen property. His method of entering the house or apartment is as follows: Making no attempt at concealment, he boldly knocks at the front door and rings the doorbell. If no one answers, he opens his tool kit and goes to work with bit and brace, boring holes in the door panel close to the lock, subsequently enlarging these with the small saw to remove a corner of the door panel. He then reaches through and unlocks the door. While he is so engaged, he stands directly in front of the door so that, in the case of a house it is difficult to see, from the street, what he is doing. When forcing entrance to an apartment, he often carries a small sheet of plywood which can be quickly

placed over the panel opening should anyone come into the corridor where he is working. After obtaining entrance to the house, he fixes the plywood to the door as if a temporary repair had been effected. If accosted by a house-owner or neighbor, he brazenly it out by insisting he was called to do a repair job on a door damaged by some burglar. Should an attempt be made to detain him, he usually assaults his accuser with hammer or other tools. Though not known to carry firearms, this man is **EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**.

"No monkey business about skeleton keys or picklocks," I commented. "Just the direct, frontal attack on a man's castle."

"It takes a special kind of nerve to pull that sort of stuff," the lieutenant admitted. "Look what he did this morning. Went right ahead, ransacking the bureaus in this dame's bedroom, *after* the dame's next-door neighbor got suspicious and asked what he was doing there. He had about a hundred and fifty bucks worth of silverware and meltable gold in his tool box when we put the arm on him."

"I take it he didn't come along quietly," I said.

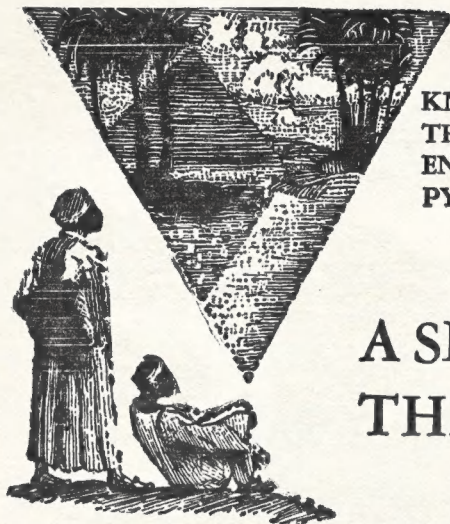
The Smartest Can Be Dumb

"We had to work him over a little." The lieutenant smiled thinly. "He'll still carry the marks of Barney's pistol-sight on his skull when he checks out of the pen. But he didn't seem to mind the gun-whipping so much. At least he didn't squawk about having been 'thirded' into making a confession. What griped him was his own dumbness in getting caught."

"How'd the dame get suspicious of him?" I asked.

"When we told him, he nearly blew a fuse. The veins stood out on his fore-

(Continued on page 130)



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WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

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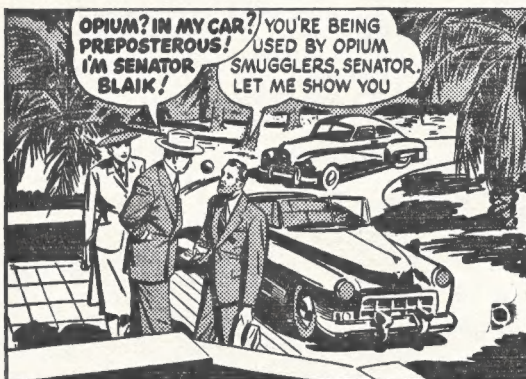
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LATE THAT NIGHT



JUST FOR LAUGHS



ARMED with a can of pepper, a bandit held up a New York City telegram office. He walked in, asked to send a message, and while supposedly writing it out, suddenly blew a blinding cloud of pepper into the face of the clerk. By the time the clerk had quit *ka-chooing* \$80 were missing from the office.

AT SLOUGH, ENGLAND, a man paid his old schoolteacher a sentimental visit, proudly told her of the success he'd made in life—then left with her handbag.

THE STAID OLD British Food Ministry has been using a voluptuous blonde to ferret out weak-willed butchers. The blonde thaws the resistance of meat men with a sultry approach, pockets a couple of slices of bacon over the legal ration limit—then chills them with a summons.

A NEW KIND of fisherman has been operating along the bay coast of Cape Town, South Africa. He sits atop cliffs that rise from beaches and while the swimmers are frolicking with the waves, fishes with rod and line for their watches, trousers, shirts, and shoes.

A GOOD-LOOKING young woman ran up to a Pittsburgh, Pa., citizen, flung her arms around him, and kissed him passionately, then leaped into an auto and drove off. For a moment the man just stood in his tracks, spellbound with fascination. Then he discovered his wallet was gone.

OIL CITY, PA., shopkeepers found themselves being rooked by persons who walk into their stores, pick up an article, walk over to a clerk—and ask for a refund on an item that never was purchased in the first place.

GLASGOW, SCOTLAND, police arrested a mail thief who extracted letters from mailboxes by using a matchbox loaded with lead, covered with a sticky substance, and tied to the end of a piece of string.

AT BATHURST, Australia, police do not lock up drunks. They merely cart them out to the bushes and leave them. The long walk home is very sobering.

A LADY arrested in Washington, D. C., for shoplifting wore two pairs of bloomers sewed together at the bottom so as to form a neat receptacle for the stolen merchandise.

TWO PRISONERS made a clean escape from the Gadsen, Ala., jail—a very clean one. They soaped up their bodies so they were able to slide through a window only twelve inches wide.

A WINDSOR, CANADA, man broke into the home of vacationing residents, then phoned a furniture dealer, who came over, made an estimate, paid him on the spot, and hauled all the furniture away.

MAN SINISTER

A Novel by **TALMAGE POWELL**



*Steve had never even met the girl, yet her torrid love-making
was leading him to the brink of disaster!*



She was going to have
a baby. My baby. . . .

Chapter I

CAME out of the three-day spree in a flophouse on Diamond Street. After I decided where I was, I sat on the bed and held my head in my hands for a while. I found my coat crumpled on a chair. There was a nearly full pint of Old Seaman in the pocket. I gagged, looking at the whisky. It seemed that even as an alcoholic I was an also-ran. I knew then that I was finished with

this kind of drinking. It was not the inevitable belief born of hang-over and remorse. It was the simple recognition that whisky had not done for me what I had hoped. The wrong memories blacked out, leaving stark and clear the very memory I'd been wanting to escape for a long time. The memory of what I had done to my wife.

I slugged the Old Seaman once to still

the shaking of my hands. I wanted a shave and a bath, after the drink slid down.

I put on the coat, and turned up the collar. Then I went out on Diamond Street, walked two blocks, and caught a taxi. I rode over to Papa Joe's house.

A strange black car with New York plates was parked in the driveway. I went around to the rear entrance. Ellen was coming out of the pantry. She jumped like a frightened kitten. She and her brother, Wilfred, were the household servants. She was about seventeen, a peaked little thing with faded brown hair and startled brown eyes. She and Wilfred came of the poorest kind of mountain family.

"Oh, Mr. Martin!" She made it sound as if she had been scared by Old Nick himself.

"Who is the company from New York?"

"Your brother." Then her mouth became petulant. Her voice was sullen as she added, "And with a new wife. A New York girl."

I took the back stairs to the second floor. In my room I set the pint of Old Seaman on the bureau.

The door opened and Wilfred shuffled in. "I heard you come up, Mr. Martin. Anything I can fetch for you?"

He was a year or so older than his sister, an obese boy with a round, soft face thatched with limp, sandy hair. His face and his vacant, flat blue eyes suggested inbreeding. He was sly, evasive.

I shook my head. "How long has Harold been here?"

"Couple days."

"Well, it's a nice time of year to bring his new wife to Asheville. Plenty of summer color and cool nights in the mountains now."

Wilfred grunted. "If there ain't anything you need, I'll be going on downstairs."

AFTER he went out, I picked up a razor, shaving cream, and a towel from the bureau. The door opened a second time. This time it was Papa Joe.

He slammed the door. He beat the tip of his cane against the floor. He carried the cane more like a weapon than an aid to his crippled right knee. He was a

small man with pale blue-eyes, sparse gray hair always plastered to his narrow skull, and bitterness written all over him. He came from an old Southern family, the kind that used to have colonels.

"Steve, you stinker! You rotter!"

"I've been drunk before."

"Not at a time like this. Look at you! Did you let Vera see you?"

"Vera?"

"Harold's wife. A nice impression you'd have made. I hope you crawled in the back way."

My face went hot. "I did. You make Vera sound pretty important."

"Harold has done quite well for himself. But you wouldn't understand much about a wife, would you?"

I had to sit down. "You're hitting low."

He laughed, a sound filled with sadistic pleasure. I looked at him. A sudden chill grabbed my spine.

"How long have you hated me this way?" I asked.

"Hated you? I don't. I despise you, as I despise all weakness. Weakness in Government, in men, in theories. Unfortunately the weak number many, and are able to usurp power rightfully belonging to their protectors."

"You're telling me to get out?"

"Not at all. I rather enjoy the spectacle of you."

He was not only my senior by twenty-eight years; he was the man who had raised me. I could not strike him. He had spoken his exit line. I kept my face turned until I heard him leave the room.

I got my shaving stuff together again. "Nuts to you," I told the Old Seaman bottle. Like many women, the bottle would not keep its promises.

I shaved without my mind being on the task. I was stunned at the feelings I'd uncovered in Papa Joe. Something pretty excruciating must have happened to have shattered his control. I didn't wonder much about it. There remained for me to leave as much like a gentleman as possible.

Now that I'd discovered his feelings, fragments of memories out of my youth came back—his treatment of me, little actions and words dropped here and there. I'd never thought too much of it

before. I'd long been conditioned to accept the status of orphan in the household. Now I began to question Papa Joe's purpose. Perhaps my status, my failures, had been food for years for his sadism.

I went downstairs. My head was pretty clear, though a dull ache was working on the base of my skull. I was beginning to get hungry.

The strange car was gone from the driveway. I threw my cigarette over the porch railing, went back in the house, and turned into the heavy, gloomy, overstuffed parlor. A woman was sitting in a mohair wing chair. She was thumbing through a magazine without seeing it.

When she looked up, I said, "How do you do? You must be Vera."

"Why, yes, and I suppose you are Steven."

She was beautiful. Her hair was a soft blonde mane. She had wide shoulders, a narrow waist, and good legs, and full breasts with a promise of lushness not hidden by her plunging neckline.

I offered her a cigarette. She took it, and as I held a light for her I had a close-up of her face. Natural, unplucked even brows, gray eyes, a mouth that was full without seeming large.

"Do you plan to be in Asheville long?" I asked her.

"I don't know."

I caught the cloud that shadowed her eyes for an instant. Maybe she had made the trip against her will. Or perhaps she just didn't like it here.

"How do you like our natural wonders—Chimney Rock, the Smokies, the Vanderbilt house?"

"I couldn't say. I haven't seen any of them."

A GAIN that strain in her face. The room grew uncomfortable. She rose, walked to the window.

"How far is it to Pressley's Drug Store?" she asked.

"About four blocks. Would you like something from there?"

"No. Harold went over there. He should have been back by now." She stopped speaking. Her face was white. I went over beside her.

"Is something wrong?"

"No—no," she said quickly. "I just haven't been feeling up to par. The trip down and all, you know."

Where the lace curtains parted, I glanced through the window. A man was standing in the shadows of a tree across the street. I couldn't see details from here, but he was not Harold. Too short and blocky.

"It is a little close in here," I said.

I raised the window, propped my palms on the dusty sill. The man across the street walked away. I turned from the window.

Vera said, "Would you mind terribly walking down toward the drug store? I'm worried about Harold. He's a little upset. We had a bit of trouble with the car on the way down."

"I'll take a walk down there," I said.

I went out into the hall. It was a long hall, with a high ceiling, gloomy as twilight. Portraits of Cranfords long dead reposed against the walls in oval frames.

As I reached the porch, Harold's black car swung into the driveway. I waited for him. He smiled as he came up the porch steps carrying a small package he'd brought from the drug store.

We shook hands and said the usual. Long time no see. You're looking well. All that.

He hadn't changed much since the last time I'd seen him. Still the clear, fragile-china skin, the light blond hair that waved a little, and with a few locks loose to the breeze. A few more lines were about his eyes, and his mouth was beginning to develop some of the steel-trap qualities of Papa Joe's.

He was a magazine illustrator, a successful one. Periodically he would send little notices to the Asheville papers when his work was appearing in one of the big national magazines. Now and then nice old ladies and aspiring young artists from the local art club would drop around to ask for Harold's address.

"It's nice you could get away for a while," I said to him.

Whatever was between Papa Joe and myself, I had lived a portion of my life with this man like a brother. We had never been close, though, and in school while I'd been getting a collar-bone broken playing football Harold had been

on the debating team. Yet there was bound to be a sort of feeling between us in spite of the fact that we were only foster brothers, and nothing Papa Joe said or did would affect that.

"You should have written that you were married," I said, "and were coming down. We'd have given you a reception."

"The past three years haven't given me much time to write," he said. "I don't care for parties, anyway."

"Liar!" I laughed.

He turned on me suddenly. His eyes got hard. His voice was harsh. "I mean it, Steve! No parties. I didn't come down here to fool around with a lot of people."

"It's your trip," I said.

He hesitated. "Well, look, Steve. I didn't mean that quite the way it sounded."

"Forget it. I met your wife. Was she a model?"

"No. A secretary to a magazine editor."

"She know how come I'm a Martin in a family of Cranfords?"

He nodded. "I sketched the details when I told her about you."

I watched him go into the parlor. I'd been tense, talking to him. But he hadn't asked about Bryanne, my own wife.

Chapter II

I WALKED upstairs. But I wasn't in the house. I was back again in a USO club and it was the time of the big war. I was fresh out of OCS, a green as grass ninety-day wonder in the infantry. A crowd of brass was gathered near the punch bowl. As a rift appeared, I saw her. She was dark, smoothly tanned by the sun with black hair and eyes as merry as chinkapins. She was wearing white.

"North Carolina?" she said to me as we danced. "At last the Army is improving."

"What part?" I asked.

"Greensboro," she said.

I should have known then, but I just didn't pause to think. Bryanne Quavely. North Carolina. Cigarette factories.

Later, it didn't seem so important. There were too many other matters to be settled in the world at the moment to allow a little thing like a few million bucks to stand in the way of quick marriage when you know it's your last leave, and she knows it too.

She lived all the way to the Rhine with me, in my heart. Mrs. Steve Martin. Who were the Quavelys?

A stealthy footfall behind a closed door in the upper hall brought me back to the present. I opened the door. It was obviously the room Harold and Vera were occupying.

Wilfred was standing near the closet, his fat shaking as if he were afraid to look over his shoulder. A pair of pliers showed its snout over the lip of the hip pocket of his jeans.

I walked across the room, spun him around. Then I made a quick grab and tore the revolver out of his hand.

He wiped his nose sullenly with his forefinger.

"Where'd you get this?" I balanced the gun.

"It's his—Harold's."

"You found it in here?" I demanded.

"Yeah, but I wasn't going to take it. I was just looking at it."

"You know what Mr. Cranford told you the last time he caught you snooping."

"I wasn't snooping! I was just starting to straighten the room."

"That's Ellen's job."

"She's busy with this cooking—for them, him!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing." He was sullen.

"You'd be better off to talk to me," I advised. "You'd get more understanding."

He raised his eyes. Surprisingly they were swimming with hot tears. "I hate him! I hope he gets hurt. Ellen's always trying to smooch him when she gets him in a corner."

"Ellen wouldn't do that. She knows Harold is married."

"She wouldn't care!" he said defiantly. "To her he's a big New York artist. She's always felt that way. A wife wouldn't matter. She said once she wouldn't mind having a baby, if it was Harold's."



McGinty whirled, knowing
that death was coming

I'd known for a long time that Ellen had carried a torrid crush on Harold. I'd expected her to outgrow it. Now, seemingly, his absence and success had made her heart grow fonder than ever. I would have to suggest to Harold that he have a talk with Ellen, convince her that if her love was strong enough she would carry it in noble silence to the end of her days. It probably would appeal to the martyr in her.

"What makes you think Harold will get hurt?" I asked Wilfred. "You're not getting any foolish notions, are you?"

"Naw. But I know he's scared, and running. And when a man's like that he's in danger of getting hurt. He's got

a gun, too. He wouldn't if somebody hadn't followed him down here."

"I think you're mistaken," I said calmly. "A lot of people keep guns on their premises. Some even carry them when they're taking a trip by car. Now put the pistol back where you found it and get downstairs about your business."

I THOUGHT it over after Wilfred was gone. The big question in my mind was the man who'd been across the street watching the house from the shadows of the tree. I wondered who he was and why he was following Harold—if he was. It was possible that Wilfred's

imagination was exaggerating things. If something really serious was afoot, Harold should—and was able—to go to the police.

Mind your own knitting, Martin.

I went back downstairs.

Dinner was a quiet meal. I saw that Vera noticed the way Ellen hovered at Harold's elbow to serve him. The beautiful blonde smiled quietly. She was pretty sure of her man.

Papa Joe related incidents out of Harold's childhood in an attempt to bring humor to the dinner. Nobody laughed much. It was obvious that Papa Joe was pleased with his son's marriage. Vera brought an air of sophistication, poise, charm, even into a dining room that seemed to have been designed for glum eating.

Papa Joe was no less expansive about his son. "He was touched with something different, perhaps near genius, from his boyhood," Papa Joe told Vera. "Not much like Steve, who cut classes when he got the chance and seemed determined to get mixed up in one scrape after another."

I met his eyes with a smile. I hadn't eaten much of his bread since I'd been able to shift for myself. But less than a month ago, after grogging myself up and losing my job in Charleston, I'd returned to Asheville. I hadn't figured I was sponging on him, for I believed myself just about even with Papa Joe. Money that I'd saved during the war had been partly responsible for keeping his business from going under, and I'd been paying my own way since I'd come back this time for a visit.

And this would be the final time. I knew I would never return. Already I felt that heavy sense of loss that comes with any final departure. I had spent a good part of my childhood in this house. I had shoveled snow from the front walks, and careened down the hill before the house on my first bicycle. From its rear upstairs windows I had potted at sparrows with a bean-shooter.

Papa Joe's wife had been my mother's dearest friend. She had taken me in after I had lost my mother, and she had loved me like her own son. I'd eaten cookies baked by her in the same range that Ellen used today. When she, my

foster mother, had died the soul had gone from Papa Joe's home.

After dinner Vera and I wandered toward the parlor, talking idly.

"I noticed you called Mr. Cranford 'Papa Joe,'" she said. "Why is that?"

"With my own parents dead," I explained, "I felt that I shouldn't call him 'Papa,' childish notion. So I tacked the name 'Papa Joe' onto him, and soon everybody was using it, including grown-ups."

"He doesn't like the name, does he?"

"I don't know. Now that you mention it, I suppose he doesn't."

She laughed. "I'm glad I'm getting to know you, Steve. You're refreshing. You accept things at face value, in perfectly good faith. You're resilient. You keep right on acting in good faith even when life lets you down."

"I really appear that way to you?" I was surprised.

"Of course. Did I say something wrong?"

I grinned wryly. "You might have done something easy, like swatting me with that vase over there. I've acted with less faith than anybody I ever had the displeasure to meet. Sometimes I think I'm the most decayed one of the whole tribe."

"You mustn't think such things about yourself!" she chided.

"It isn't healthy, normal, is it?"

"No," she said distantly.

I was sorry our talk had been routed into this channel. She was a nice kid. She loved Harold. If she would bear the selfishness I knew to run deep in him, she would enjoy a nice life as the wife of a successful artist.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You know I have a wife, don't you? Harold told you what I did to her?"

"No, I didn't know. Now it's my turn—I'm sorry." She offered her hand and I shook it. We were friends again, and I was glad.

From upstairs, Harold called to her. After she had gone, I lighted a cigarette and went out on the porch to smoke it.

I was finishing the cigarette when the stranger came. I was instantly almost sure it was the same man I'd seen watching the house. Short, blocky, dressed in a baggy suit.

WHEN he stepped on the front porch I got a look at his face in the light spilling from the hallway. A heavy Irish face. Eyes of cold slate. A red stubble of beard. A mouth that could be either generous or tough as they come.

I hadn't moved out of the shadows. "Cranford," he said, "I hope you didn't think I would give up so easily." His voice was deep, rumbling in his chest, his words spoken with a clipped Yankee accent.

His belligerence annoyed me. I said, "I'm not Cranford. I'm his foster brother. Would you like to give him a message?"

"I'd like to talk to him."

"I could see if he's in."

"He's in. He hasn't left the house since he drove back an hour or more ago. His car is here, and he hasn't left the house walking unless he went out the back way."

"You're saying you've been watching us?"

"I'm saying that I've been trying to see him. Now will you tell him I'm here?"

Harold himself stepped out on the porch. "I've nothing more to say to you, McGinty. Except that this has got to stop! You understand?"

Harold was deeply shaken, facing this man he called McGinty as if the act required every ounce of courage he possessed. He was in a dangerous mood, his back to whatever wall McGinty had erected.

McGinty said, "We can't talk here."

"There's no more talking to do!" Harold said flatly. "You've been wrong from the beginning, McGinty. You'd do well to make yourself scarce."

McGinty stood with his hands jammed in his pockets, a thin smile on his face. "I'm getting you just about where I want you," he said. "Just about to the breaking point."

His words reacted on Harold like short, hard punches to the mid-section.

"We'll talk," McGinty said.

Harold dropped a glance at me. I interpreted it as resignation. He wished to speak to McGinty alone. I went in the house.

The door of Harold's room was open

when I passed down the upstairs hall. Vera was alone in the room, sitting rigid beside the bed, as if waiting for something to happen, something beyond her control.

"Hello," she said, attempting a smile as she saw me stop in the doorway.

"Hello."

"Harold is down there now talking with a strange man, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yes." I stepped inside the room.

"What's it all about?"

"It's that damn painting." Falling from her lips, the invective stunned me.

"One of Harold's?"

"Yes. Now and then he decides to do a serious piece of work. Occasionally he even manages to get around to it."

"This man—this McGinty—is after the painting?"

"No, nothing like that. McGinty cares nothing for the painting. The painting in itself is worth little. Two hundred dollars, I should say. Harold calls the painting *The Wharf Girl*. It's supposed to express a mood of—well, a very dark, morbid mood. We saw the girl in a waterfront spaghetti joint one night. She had tried to jump off a dock. A big Irishman had seen her and had stopped her. He had brought her into the café and bought her coffee. She was still sobbing."

"The man was McGinty?"

"You catch on quickly."

"He's Irish—at least he looks Irish. I was just guessing."

"I wish we had never seen the girl," Vera said, a note almost of desperation in her voice. "She was a tiny thing who looked as if she'd always been underfed. She had lovely white skin and her eyes were the largest and darkest I've ever seen. When they turned on you, their gaze seemed to jump at you. They were eyes so morbid and pathetic it was hard to look at them and not shudder. Harold wanted to paint her."

She stopped speaking. I let the silence hang. She didn't break it.

I said, after a moment, "You haven't told me anything really."

"I haven't intended to. Why should I mix you up in our troubles?"

She was listening. For Harold's footfall returning up the stairs. Then the footfall sounded and her shoulders

sagged faintly in relief. She practically forgot I was there. I picked up the cue and crossed the hallway toward my own room. Harold brushed past me. His face was cotton-white; his eyes blazing.

He entered his room, and I heard his sharp, angry voice speaking to Vera, without being able to distinguish individual words.

Chapter III

A FEW moments after I closed my own door behind me I heard Papa Joe's door slam, heard his footsteps resound in the hall. Then the slam of another door. Papa Joe had joined his son and daughter-in-law.

McGinty, I thought, whatever it is pushing you, you'd better have your game well-planned. You're dealing with a high-strung man. Like TNT Harold might go off in your face if you shake him a little the wrong way.

The pint of Old Seaman was still on my bureau. I picked it up. The amber fluid brought back a quick memory. A party. Year 1945. Just the two of us having a party because war had ceased to be my mistress and I was home with my wife.

It was almost a solemn party. She had been unutterably dear and desirable sitting across the table from me. The long agony of waiting was mirrored in her eyes, eyes that were dark pools of feeling that night. As we danced, her arm across my back clutched me. We didn't talk as we danced. I think we were both afraid because of the dammed up feelings inside of us. Not afraid of the feelings themselves, understand, only afraid that an untoward gesture might spoil the mood.

We went back to our table and drank highballs. She looked at her drink and said, "You'll never be sorry, Steve?"

"I? I could never be! I should be asking you that question myself."

"Sorry that I'm not a Quavely any longer?" Her laugh was shaky, causing me to look at her quickly.

She must have had a pretty rugged time of it at home. They'd had months and months to take her away from me. They had failed. But I suspected how hard they must have tried. I had met

her mother and sister on one furlough, not long before that last furlough before I shipped out. They'd known they were losing her. Lucy, the sister, in particular was infused with the importance of family prestige. One thing could be said for Lucy. She hadn't kept her cards up her sleeve. She had drawn the line; she had spoken her on guard; then she had done battle.

But all of them had failed. I never could blame them too much. I had lost Bryanne finally through failure of my own.

I set the Old Seaman back on the bureau. If Lucy were on my team, if she were here now, what would she say? Something like, "Ever since Papa Joe's flare-up late this afternoon you've been thinking, haven't you? He bashed your eyes open, didn't he? Just as soon as you can do so without any unpleasantness, making a scene, you're leaving here. Then why not keep right on fighting? You won once. Then at the first failure you felt that Bryanna was lost to you forever. Forever is a long time, my friend. In this life you're not privileged to back up and start over, to erase past mistakes, but you're never denied a new beginning from the moment you decide to begin again."

I knew then that I'd been toying with the idea for weeks. I hadn't liked the taste of defeat from the beginning. Stuff like the Old Seaman hadn't been able to wash it out of my mouth.

I walked over to the window. I forgot Harold's troubles, Papa Joe's raw bitterness because he was forced to grub for a living in the construction business of grandeur—this in a land where his forbears had ruled.

I felt exhilarated. There would have to be a job, of course, a good one. A little egg in the bank. But it could be done.

From the window, I looked down on the front lawn. My thoughts broke off as I saw the shadowy figure of a man go down the walk, turn north on the sidewalk. He was about the size and build of Harold.

A knock sounded on my door. Still watching the quickly moving man, outside, I said, "Come in."

The door opened, and I turned to find

Vera moving across the room toward me. Her eyes were agitated. "I thought Harold might be in here."

"No, I haven't seen him since he came up after talking to McGinty."

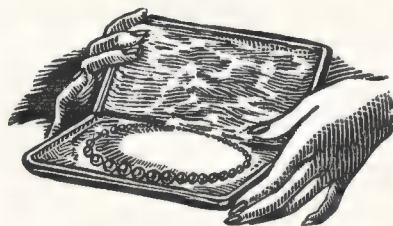
She sat weakly on the edge of the bed. "I'm scared," she said frankly. "Harold said he wanted a big slug of straight whisky to settle his nerves. He said there was a bottle in the buffet. I went to the dining room and got the bottle and glasses. When I came back up just now he was gone."

I TURNED back to the window. It was dark out there now, as dark as if a thunder squall were in the making. Then

ACCORDING to a recent survey, women shoplifters are overwhelmingly in favor of longer skirts. The longer length, incidentally, is responsible for the revival of a gadget women shoplifters made excellent use of years ago.

This device consists of a band of stout elastic worn directly above the knee. A number of hooks are conveniently attached to the "garter." It's a simple matter for the shoplifter to bend down as though to adjust a shoelace or her hose and with a practiced rapid motion fasten a stolen object onto one of the hooks. Such hooks are sometimes worn around the waist or hips, but only by girls who do not mind looking bulky.

Naturally, the first thing department store detectives (ladies, of course) look for on a suspect are—hooks.



by BESS RITTER
OF CROOKS
and HOOKS

in the glow of the street light at the intersection of Hickory street and Northland avenue, I saw my man. He was turning west on Hickory.

"I'll look around outside," I said. "Likely he decided a short walk would relax him more than a drink."

She looked up at me. "I hope you're right," she said in a low voice. "But Harold is armed."

Papa Joe and I entered the hall at the same moment.

"What's up?" he demanded. "Where are you going?"

I didn't have time to answer his questions. I took the stairs down two at a time.

By the time I reached the intersection of Hickory and Northland, Harold had vanished. I stood in indecision. He hadn't been heading uptown toward the business district. His turn west on

Hickory, the last move I had seen him make, removed the possibility of that. Northland ran straight into the business section. He wasn't going far, either, or he would have taken his car.

I started west on Hickory, walking rapidly under the dark canopy of the maples that lined the sidewalk. The terrain changed in a few blocks. Houses became fewer, weed-grown fields more prominent. And a few more blocks further on the street would begin twisting downhill toward a settlement of large old houses that had been converted into tenement dwellings for Negroes.

I could surmise only one destination for Harold. About midway between

Northland and the Negro district stood an empty cottage on Hickory that Papa Joe owned. If I did not find Harold there, I had lost him completely.

The bungalow stood forbidding and dismal, its windows like black mirrors. I passed the weathered, lopsided "For Sale" sign at the corner of the yard. The unkempt grass chopped at my ankles.

Just as I was deciding that my hunch had been wrong, I saw a flash of light in the bungalow. I moved to the window that had reflected it.

Harold and McGinty were inside the bungalow, McGinty crouched in the beam of the flashlight in Harold's hand. McGinty's eyes were distended, his face mottled with fear. He was holding one hand out before him, saying hoarsely, "No!"

Then Harold began shooting. Mc-

Ginty whirled, knowing in that final instant that death was coming. He plunged through a doorway behind him, into the yawning black emptiness of the room beyond. Harold fired five times, as rapidly as he could pull the trigger. At the distance, I knew it was impossible to miss. I knew the slugs were hammering squarely in the Irishman's broad back between the shoulder-blades.

The impetus of his motion kept McGinty moving for a second or two. He crashed into something—a door or piece of discarded furniture—in the dark room beyond. And then stillness. Just as suddenly as the whole thing had started, it was over.

Still holding the light and gun, Harold raised his hands to his face. His features were contorted, white, ghastly. He pressed the backs of his hands against the sides of his face.

"McGinty?" he queried. And when no sound came from the adjoining room, a sob broke in his throat. He let the flashlight fall from his nerveless fingers, and bolted.

He chose the back way out of the cottage, a short-cut across weed-grown fields back to the house on Northland. He plunged into the brush and by the time I reached the edge of the yard he had crashed his way out of sight.

I returned to the cottage. A moment's pause there. Then I went back out on Hickory street.

The nearest house was about a block's distance away. It was dark, and remained so. Then I saw a lone man hurrying down the street. The shots, then, had been heard. For a moment I had entertained the hope that they had gone unnoticed. The gun was small; the shots had been muffled by the empty cottage.

I faded into the shadows of a tree; heard the quick snapping of the approaching man's heels against the sidewalk. He paused at the edge of the walk leading to the cottage porch. The man was Papa Joe.

THE scuff of my foot startled him, I swung him about, swinging up his cane for a quick blow. He lowered the cane slowly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked shortly. "When you ran out of the house,

I followed you. Was that shooting I heard?"

"I'm afraid it was."

"Inside the cottage?"

"Yes."

"Who was in there?"

"Harold and a man called McGinty. They were apparently keeping an appointment made earlier this evening."

Papa Joe's mouth was a tight, thin line, yet his voice quaked, "He—shot Harold?"

"No, it was the other way around."

Some of the sudden, tortured agony was dissipated from Papa Joe's bleak features. "He hurt McGinty badly?"

I hesitated. Yet to evade the question and have him learn the truth later would be more cruel than giving it to him now.

I said, "He shot McGinty until the gun was empty. He was hysterical. I don't think he knew fully what he was doing. But it's certain he killed a man in there."

Papa Joe's whole body shook as if with a chill. But his voice came flat, controlled. "What are you going to do now?"

"Get back to the house as fast as I can, knock my stomach in place with a stiff slug of Old Seaman, then call the police." Instantly I wondered if I'd sounded flippant. I hadn't wanted to.

"No," Papa Joe said, "you're not calling the police." The shaking was gone now. As he faced me he was like a tight steel spring.

"What else can we do?" I demanded. "We can't conceal the fact that the man followed Harold here to Asheville. If we try to hide this, it's going to make matters worse. Let's shoot it clean. That's Harold's only chance."

"Steve, Harold is my own son, my only son. Do you think I'll allow him to be sacrificed to a whim of yours?"

I experienced an upsurge of impatience. It was not a moment to be governed by whims, even his.

I took a step toward the cottage. Papa Joe's cane moved with the speed of a striking snake. I managed to get my face out of the way, but the cane crashed on my shoulders. Before he could strike again, I tore it out of his grasp.

He stiffened, breathing thickly through his nostrils, the glitter in his eyes a challenge.

"Because of the years Harold and I spent together as children," I said, "I'll do what I can to help him. Otherwise, the feelings you and I have for each other are such that we can't stay under the same roof much longer. Now go back to the house. I think Harold went there. Try to get him calmed down. He's going to need a sound, steady grip on himself. I'll see if there's anything at all that can be done for McGinty, then we'll call the police."

I handed the cane back to him. He strode stiffly away.

The back door of the cottage was still standing open, as Harold had left it in his headlong flight. I groped my way into a dark hall.

I could feel damp sweat on the palms of my hands. If McGinty was alive I didn't want him thinking I was Harold, and start shooting.

I said, "McGinty, this is not Cranford. I'm Steve Martin. I've come to help you."

There was no answer. The silence became stifling. A wan glow of light was just ahead—the flashlight that Harold had dropped.

I entered the room where the shooting had taken place. The smell of gunpowder was still strong. I picked up the flashlight and moved to the room where McGinty had crashed down.

The room was empty! McGinty had gone down in this room. I had heard him fall. But he was not there now!

Chapter IV

THERE were two or three pieces of junk furniture in the room, none of them large enough to conceal McGinty. I pushed a moth-eaten hassock to one side and opened the closet door. The closet yawned empty.

I didn't begin to get the shakes, though, until I had searched every room in the bungalow, without finding McGinty. Had he crawled outside? But it was incredible that a man carrying five bullets in his back could have crawled away in the short time between Harold's departure and when I entered the place.

Nevertheless, I checked the doors and windows. All were locked except the

door Harold had used. The back door, then, was the only possible exit from the cottage. Beyond it stretched the high grass of the back yard for about a hundred feet before it blended with the high weeds of a vacant lot. The grass was heavy with the moisture of a summer night in the mountains. A wounded man laboring across the yard would have left a trail a child could read. Yet for spots which Harold's feet had mashed, the grass in that yard was untrampled.

McGinty most definitely had not crawled out of the cottage and away. He must still be in there. But how could I have missed anything as large as McGinty's bulk?

I went back inside, and this time I included the attic and the cellar in my search. A cold sweat was on my face.

Finally I went back to the room in which Harold had shot McGinty, leveled the light in my hand as if it were a gun. Could Harold possibly have missed at this point-blank range?

I searched the wall and door casing, but found no bullet marks. Those bullets had come to rest in McGinty's broad back and chest. When I had searched for signs of blood leading to the back door, and found none, I knew nothing else to do.

Standing on the back steps, I felt the slow, hard beating of my heart against my ribs. McGinty was not human—able to take five bullets, lose no blood, and walk or run across the back yard without leaving any foot marks on the grass.

Such a creature did not exist, of course. Then what had happened? Had I witnessed a killing at all? But I knew I had.

Vera was waiting on the front porch when I got back to the house on Northland. When she saw me, she ran to meet me halfway down the walk. She caught my arm.

"Steve! What has happened? Harold came in babbling that McGinty wouldn't hound him any longer. Right after that, Papa Joe showed up, practically writhing. He was seething with anger, and deeply frightened at the same time. He called Harold into the parlor and they talked for a minute. Then Papa Joe went upstairs, yelling for Wilfred. He hasn't come down since, and I can't get

anything out of Harold. I've been waiting for you. What is it, Steve?"

"I'm not sure yet. Where is Harold?"

"Upstairs, in our room."

She followed me up. I opened the door. Harold swiveled his body around from the bureau. He'd been pouring himself a drink from the bottle that Wilfred had brought up from downstairs.

I closed the door. Vera moved around beside me, watching both of us.

I said bluntly, "You're in serious trouble, Harold. If you want help, you'd better level with me. Why has McGinty followed you all the way down here because of that wharf girl painting?"

"Who said anything about the painting?"

"I did," Vera said quietly. "Don't you think you'd better tell him the rest of it?" She curved her glance at me. She was badly frightened, but clinging to her remaining poise with sheer willpower.

Harold had had almost an hour to calm himself down. The flush in his cheeks revealed that he'd been hitting the bottle heavily, bolstering his courage.

"First, Steve," he said cautiously, "what are you going to do? Have a big slug and call the cops, as you told Papa Joe?"

"No, not yet."

Astonishment whitened his face. "You mean you'll help me get McGinty out of there so no one will ever know?"

"Not hardly. McGinty vanished."

"He *what*?"

"Just that. There's no trace of him in the cottage. No bullet holes. No blood."

SILENCE fell over the room. Vera's mouth worked. She cried suddenly, "What is this about bullets and blood?"

Harold set the whisky on the bureau and moved quickly to take her in his arms. But she was almost herself. She backed away from him, hysterical tears spilling down her cheeks.

"No, don't try to wheedle me into submission! Tell me what happened to McGinty!"

"Darling, please—" Harold slipped his arm about her. She shrugged it off quickly, turning to me.

"Then Steve will tell me!"

Over her shoulder I glimpsed Harold's anxious face. The plea in his eyes was urgent, unmistakable. It might have influenced me more than I thought but at the moment I believed I was thinking only of the lovely, distraught girl who was his wife.

I gripped her shoulders, kept my voice even and gentle as possible. "Tonight Harold met McGinty and fired a gun at him. Fortunately, he did not shoot straight."

She murmured a broken, thankful sounding word and sank in a chair. Harold poured a small drink of straight whisky for her. She took it.

I crossed the hall to my room. I pulled my scuffed gladstone out of the closet, opened it on the bed, and began tossing clothes into it. I had the bag half-filled when the door opened. I threw a glance over my shoulder. Harold closed the door, came across the room.

"What's the idea of the bag, Steve?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

He lighted a cigarette. His fingers were still shaking. "I know you had a run-in with Papa Joe this afternoon. He told me. Now you're peeved at me. I can't say that I blame you."

I said nothing, but went on packing.

"What you did tonight was decent, Steve. I appreciate it. I really do."

"Why don't you take this McGinty trouble to the police, whatever it is, and be done with it?"

His smile was sly. "There's no need for that now, is there?"

Some inkling of what he was thinking slipped into my consciousness. I snapped the gladstone closed before lifting my gaze to meet his. I saw the expression in his eyes that I was afraid I would see.

"You're thinking," I said, "that I carried McGinty out of the cottage, that I'll chuck him some place for you."

"I could hardly ask you to take such a risk, could I?"

I was angered at his growing confidence. I swung the bag off of the bed. "I didn't lie to Vera. McGinty really did vanish, even though he couldn't have left the cottage. If you missed him, the walls of the cottage would have stopped the bullets. The walls showed not a single bullet mark. McGinty took all that lead,

and still did not bleed."

The sincerity of my tone caused a momentary shadow of doubt to cross Harold's face. He was struggling to believe what he wanted to believe, and he won.

"I hope you don't tell that tale to any police inspectors, Steve. I'll side you in anything you say, provided you'll keep it plausible." He turned to leave, then paused. "If they find McGinty in a culvert it's possible they'll learn that he knew me. So it's a regrettable coincidence that he ran into trouble from another source. I'll see to it that the gun disappears—and I've not left the house all evening."

The door closed behind him. I turned to pick up the bag. I felt exactly as if I had been talking to Papa Joe.

When I reached the hallway, Ellen was just topping the stairs. She said, "There's a lady down in the parlor to see you, Mr. Martin."

I deposited the bag outside the parlor door, entered the gloomy room, and drew up short. Lucy Quavely was standing

near the center of the room, casually lighting a cigarette.

She looked at me over the tip of the flame dancing on the tiny gold lighter.

"Do you intend to come in, Steve?"

"Yes, of course." I stepped forward.

"Nice to see you, Lucy."

"You're a liar. Will you ask me to sit down?"

I MOTIONED to a chair without speaking. She was taller than Bryanne, her body more the feminine athlete's. The bones of her face were prominent, giving her almost a hungry look. She'd never worn much makeup, I remembered. Now she wore only a touch of lipstick. Her dark brown hair hung straight, almost lank. She disdained style. She was wearing a light polo coat, sweater, tweed skirt, flat-heeled shoes. Her very casualness was in itself utter pretentiousness.

The chill gaze of her slightly slanted eyes was designed to reduce her vis-à-vis to pure crudity. Often the gaze succeeded.

[Turn page]



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I voiced a question I couldn't suppress. "How is Bryanne?"

"Much better. The last operation helped. She's walking now. It was much easier for her to learn to walk the first time, when she was a baby."

"Lucy," I said thickly, "will you please say why you're here, and get out?"

"Still the ruffian," she drawled. "How dreadfully masculine you are! It was unthinkable for you to marry a Quavely in the first place. After you did that horrible thing to Bryanne I wondered sometimes if our hate wouldn't reach out and smother you. The irresistible wall, Steve, just hoping you would try to prove yourself the irresistible force."

I said nothing. Bryanne could not have survived amid turmoil. There had never been in my mind any thought of irresistible forces, only the belief that in my surrender had lain the only possible road back to life for Bryanne.

Chapter V

LUCY read in my silence my refusal to rehash the past. I was more interested by far in knowing what had brought her calling here at ten o'clock at night.

"Very well" — she shrugged — "we shan't waste words. Bryanne has met someone else, a South Carolinian. His family is in textiles."

"What will it be for you, Lucy?" I asked. "A cotton baron?"

"You don't believe me?"

"In the existence of a scion of textiles, yes. In the fact that you're arranging things your own way for Bryanne, yes. In your other implication, that she has fallen in love with this gentleman of the looms, no."

"Would it be so strange for a girl to fall in love twice?"

I kept my hands jammed deep in my pockets to conceal their shaking. I hoped the edge of confidence was there that I tried to keep in my voice when I said, "You didn't drive all the way up from Greensboro to tell me these things. You want something. What is it?"

"I really came at Father's insistence," she said arrogantly. "To bring you this."

She opened her bag, handed me an envelope. It was heavy. I opened it. It

was filled with crisp new money.

"There's five thousand dollars of it," Lucy said. "There will be five thousand more when you have gone to an easy divorce state and cut yourself loose from us for good. After all, it's only the legal gesture. For practical purposes you haven't been Bryanne's husband for some time."

I tossed the money back in her lap. Color leaped to her cheeks. "We shan't be pushed too far, Steve! We shall bargain only a little. Don't name too high a price!"

"Good night, Lucy."

"Steve! Don't you dare leave this room until you have given me an answer!" She leaped to her feet. "What is your price?"

"The Quavely money is the most important thing in the world to you. For that reason, you can't understand how it could be otherwise with anybody else. You can't pay my price, Lucy. That price would be the understanding on your part that I married Bryanne despite the fact that she was a Quavely, not because of it."

Her face flamed. She controlled her temper with an effort.

"Why must you be so unreasonable?" she demanded. "Would twenty thousand add a grain to your common sense?"

"My common sense tells me that you're doing this without Bryanne's knowledge," I accused flatly. "If she loved this guy with his spindles and shuttles she'd do her own divorcing. On the other hand, should I divorce her, the way would be clear for her to fall into your trap."

"You—" Lucy muttered hoarsely. "You're impossible! Thirty thousand, then, and that's as high as we'll go. I'm stopping at a local hotel, the Bradley. I'll stop by tomorrow morning to take you to the airport."

I watched her go. I felt tired and old, as if she had piled thirty years on my shoulders. My mind was shot through with memories of the way it had been.

Mr. and Mrs. Steve Martin. Residence, Atlanta, Ga. Occupations, heavy equipment salesman and housewife. Reason for big celebration, husband's promotion to district manager. A few drinks, but not enough to back up the

claim of the Quavelys. A spot of ice in the highway and the wheel of the car was suddenly lax and powerless in my hands. She'd been laughing at something I'd said when the skid started. Then she'd screamed and the sound had been muffled in the crash.

A long time later I'd clawed my way out of the wreckage. She was pinned beneath the car. She turned her head. I was filled with abject horror; she was still conscious.

"Steve," she'd said, "there isn't any feeling in my legs."

The closing in of the irresistible wall as I exhausted one financial source after another until no more were left. She still needed specialists, care beyond my reach. The Quavely money was her only hope. I'd told myself I should feel grateful when Papa Quavely and Lucy had offered their bargain. I was, for Bryanne's sake.

But making that bargain in no wise indicated that I was prepared to bargain again, on the terms Lucy had handed me tonight. I hoped she would enjoy the scenery during her stay here.

I ALLOWED myself to feed on my anger as I walked up Northland into the business district. I found a cheap walk-up hotel. I had come out of my binge with nearly twenty dollars left, plus a watch I could pawn tomorrow morning. Any kind of job would do until I could manage the proper appearance for the right kind of employer. There was still the Atlanta sales office of the firm turning out big shovels, ditch diggers, and bulldozers. Perhaps it it would be wise to return to the point where evil had begun and turn it into good.

Lucy, I accept the challenge.

After I had breakfast the next morning, I returned to the hotel. Two men in the dusty lobby left their lumpy chairs and started up the stairs behind me. I reached the third floor corridor, stopped at my room, slipped the key in the lock.

The two men came down the hallway and stopped, one on either side of me. The man on my left reached in his inner pocket, took out a small leather case, opened it, showing me a small, gold badge.

"I'm Captain Hagan," he said. "This is Lieutenant Conroy. Police Headquarters. You're Mr. Steven Martin?"

"Yes."

"May we speak to you?"

"Of course."

Opening the door, I motioned them into the room. Hagan was a large man, solidly built, with a wide, placid face. He looked as if he would enjoy quiet Sunday drives with his wife and kids. Conroy I judged to be ten years or so younger, about thirty-five. He was as big as Hagan, but on him it was stretched to a horizon six inches higher.

I thought, Watch it, Steve. They've found McGinty.

Hagan said, "You're the foster son of Mr. Joseph Cranford, I believe."

I waited.

He continued, "You've been staying with Mr. Cranford for a time?"

"The past week or so."

"Before that?"

"I worked in Charleston. South Carolina."

"What kind of work?"

"In Charleston I operated a bulldozer."

"Make out pretty good?"

"You know the cost of bulldozing, grading work. I made enough to keep me for the time."

"Prior to your return here, had you lived in your former home for some time?"

"No, it's been several years since I lived in Asheville." This, I thought, was a queer lead up to McGinty. Or maybe they always got some background information with their first questions.

Hagan spoke again in his molasses and corn pone accent. "You've been doing some drinking since your return?"

I gave him a quick glance. It seemed he already had tapped some source or other for background information.

"Yes," I said

"Relations were of the best between Mr. Cranford and you?"

I hesitated. "Would you mind telling me if this line of questioning is relevant to whatever brought you here?"

"I assure you that it is. Will you answer my question?"

"I haven't seen too much of Mr. Cranford since my return. Only at meal-

times, now and then in the evenings. And not at those times every day."

"You're evading what I asked you, Mr. Martin. Was there any ill feeling between you and Mr. Cranford?"

"A certain measure, I suppose."

"You've argued with him?"

"To a certain degree."

"And that's why you left his home last night?"

"Partially. How do you know when I left, or where I came?"

"Your foster brother told us you had packed a bag and left. It doesn't take long to check the hotels in a town of this size. Now, tell me, Mr. Martin, were you drinking when you returned home yesterday afternoon?"

"No."

"But you do admit a heated argument with Mr. Joseph Cranford? And you were in a high state of nerves from previous drinking?"

"Both statements are partly correct. Will you tell me what this is all leading up to?"

CONROY spoke for the first time. "A servant girl—Ellen Holcomb—went to Mr. Cranford's room this morning to call him to breakfast. She knocked on the door. It wasn't securely latched, and swung open. She found Mr. Cranford on the floor of his room. Dead. Poisoned. Murdered."

I rode with Conroy back to Northland Avenue. We entered a house heavy with the hush of death. Ellen, with eyes red and swollen from weeping, let us in and closed the front door behind us.

"Has your brother returned?" Hagan asked her gently.

"No, sir."

Hagan motioned me into the parlor. I entered and saw Harold. He was slumped in a chair, an old, tired man of thirty. In his gaze, as it fell on me, was no warmth, no sign of recognition. But then his eyes spoke an agonized question: Why, Steve? Did you do it?

I put my hand on Harold's shoulder. What could be said at a time like this? Harold nodded and left the room, in a daze.

"I wish you'd bring me up to date on the details," I said to Conroy.

He sat down in an overstuffed chair.

"Like the captain told you," he said, "the girl found him. He must have been dead there in his room since before midnight. Unless the autopsy turns up something different, we're betting that Mr. Cranford was killed with chloral hydrate administered in a drink of whisky. You know anything about poisons?"

"No."

"Well, alcohol steps up the action of chloral hydrate. Like hitting somebody over the head with a sledge-hammer. Mild doses of the stuff are used in sleeping capsules. That girl, Ellen, tells us that a doctor gave Mr. Cranford a prescription several weeks ago. Mr. Cranford had the girl get the prescription refilled day before yesterday. We found the bottle, empty, and called the druggist. Chloral hydrate."

Conroy lit a cigarette and replaced the package in his pocket. He went on then, "Naturally we thought of suicide, but the captain won't believe that Mr. Cranford was the kind of man to take his own life."

My mind was leap-frogging, trying to make a connection. Harold in flight. McGinty. The nearly worthless painting of a girl waif who'd tried to commit suicide off a New York City dock. The shooting of McGinty. The blank wall I'd encountered there in the bungalow. Now the murder of Papa Joe, the most unreasonable happening of all. I couldn't imagine how it could possibly be tied in with the rest.

Chapter VI

MY INSIDES began a transmutation to cold jelly as I considered motives. Harold would not have killed his own father. It was just as unlikely that Vera would have. Ellen and Wilfred had just as little reason. Papa Joe had been their bread and butter, and they were accustomed to his tirades.

Even if McGinty could have slipped into the house here, for some reason wanting Papa Joe out of the way, he couldn't have known where the poison was. To have him accidentally find it and prepare a drink, somehow knowing that Papa Joe would drink it, was stretching the wildest laws of chance

and coincidence far beyond the breaking point. Anyway, McGinty was after Harold, not Papa Joe.

Lucy Quavely had been in the house the night before, but what possible reason could she have for murdering Papa Joe? Besides, she wouldn't take a chance of blighting the Quavely name, no matter how much she might want to kill somebody.

And that extremely unpleasant process of elimination left only one person. My shoulder had been stiff this morning when I woke. If Hagan discovered my black and blue marks and in any way could learn that I'd received them last night when Papa Joe struck me with his cane, I could picture that police captain's reaction.

Panic crawled into my throat. I lighted a cigarette when I caught Conroy watching me closely, walked over to a chair and sat down.

"You're sure you've leveled with us, Martin?" he asked me shrewdly. "About the quarrel you had with the old man and all the other details?"

"I'm positive."

Conroy settled back in his chair. "When we find Wilfred we might pick up a lead. When did you see him last?"

"Late yesterday."

So Wilfred was gone and Hagan had been unable so far to find him. The jelly didn't suddenly turn to flesh and blood again, but I had the thought that Wilfred's disappearance might remove some of the pressure from me, give me a little time to do something. Just what, I didn't know. All I knew that Hagan didn't know was that business about McGinty and the empty bungalow. Harold wouldn't let the police in on that, of course, and certainly Vera would accede to his wishes and remain silent. She would go a long way to protect him. She had already proved she would stick to her man when the going got rough.

Hagan came back downstairs. I outlined my movements of yesterday afternoon and evening for him, except that I skipped the episode of the cottage. Even if I had mentioned it, I knew well enough that Harold would deny the whole thing. Unless McGinty or his body turned up I would be made out a ridiculous and fantastic liar, putting new questions in Ha-

gan's mind. He might even conclude that I'd been drunk enough to poison the man who had reared me.

I knew he was waiting for me to make just one slip. If there had been so much as a single bullet mark in the empty cottage I might have told him the whole story, at that. But now the only one, besides Harold and me, who had heard the shots was in the morgue.

When Hagan departed, with a caution to stay within reach, I went to look for Ellen. I found her in the kitchen. She was spreading a napkin over a plate of food she was placing in the warmer of the range. She threw a startled glance over her shoulder at me as I entered.

"I ain't myself, Mr. Martin," she said, with a tremor in her voice. "Not since the minute I found poor Mr. Cranford."

"Now of course you're worried about Wilfred."

"Yes, sir."

"You know where he is, don't you?"

Her gaze came quickly to my face. Her lips pursed. She was a pretty little creature with her wide eyes dewy with tears. "How would I know?" she wailed.

"Just a guess." I shrugged. "Wilfred scares easily. He wouldn't want to hide where he was completely alone. He'd want help, the assurance of somebody he loved and could trust. I thought he might have got in touch with you."

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Who saw him last?"

"I guess I did, Mr. Martin."

"When?"

"Last night. Young Mr. Cranford rushed in the house, then his father came in a few minutes later. Old Mr. Cranford began yelling for Wilfred to come up to his room. Wilfred went, and nobody saw him any more."

"He's hiding because he's afraid, Ellen," I told her. "Mr. Cranford must have died just before Wilfred went into his room or while he was there. Wilfred was afraid someone might think he had something to do with it and ran. But his running makes it all the worse. You see that, don't you?"

SHE lowered her eyes. "Yes, sir."

"If he gets in touch with you, you'll let me know?"

She was silent.

I said, "I promise you that I'll do everything I can for Wilfred."

She nodded.

"Harold will help too. You know Harold would never let anything happen to Wilfred, feeling as he does about you."

My stab found its mark. She was too simple to control her feelings, but not simple enough to miss the meaning of my statement. Her face went scarlet. She turned quickly and busied herself at the stove.

Harold, you stinking tramp.

Harold stayed in his room with Vera for the most part, leaving me to speak to sympathetic callers as news of Papa Joe's death spread. I made the necessary arrangements for the time when the coroner should release Papa Joe's body.

Lucy Quavely phoned me about eleven o' clock, a brittle quality in her voice.

"I have just suffered a frightful indignity," she informed me.

"We all do, at times," I murmured.

"You didn't have to send that policeman to my hotel with his questions, Steve."

"I didn't."

"You told him I was in the Cranford home last night."

"I told him you talked to me a few minutes in the parlor. By the way, Lucy, how did you happen to locate me?"

"It took a week or two," she said sharply, "tracing you from job to job. Your last employer in Charleston said you'd left for Asheville. I came up, since Mr. Cranford's home seemed to be the logical place to start looking for you here."

I drawled thoughtfully, "Did you ever consider that Papa Joe might be a powerful ally for you, Lucy—for a monetary consideration, of course?"

I expected a violent reaction. Instead, she said calmly, "Naturally I did. I knew his wife had insisted on adopting you, and that he considered you too unimportant even to be a necessary evil. I also knew that he was in constant financial difficulties. He was entirely too superior and insulting and short-tempered to be a business success."

"So you made a deal with Papa Joe?"

"I did not! I thought him too unre-

liable." She suddenly chuckled. "If I had made a deal with him Hagan would love that. It would just about fix things for you, Steve. Say you were determined to hang onto the Quavely money. Papa Joe was about to queer it. Such a grave obstacle had to be removed."

"They call that perjury, Lucy."

"Do you think the captain would believe you? Or believe me? I'm smart enough to make it good, Steve, to make it stick." She laughed again. "So I don't have to spend thirty thousand dollars on you at all, do I? You'll be sensible and agree to Bryanne's freedom now, I'm sure."

She hung up. I stood with the dead phone in my hand. A ridge of sweat had formed across my forehead. Lucy had neatly turned my suspicions of her and Papa Joe into a trap. I told myself that she was bluffing. But my heart was beating hard, with fear—and hatred.

I slammed the phone into its cradle and turned to the window. A man was idling across the street. For an instant my scalp went tight as I thought he might be McGinty. But he was too tall. A stake-out of Hagan's, probably, watching the house.

Then a taxi rolled to a stop before the house, and a woman got out. Without hesitation, she came up the walk toward the house. The same black hair. The same softly angular face. The slender body was thinner now; the long legs took short steps.

I rushed into the hall and jerked the front door open. My wife was lifting a slim finger to ring the bell!

We looked at each other and it was all I could do to control my feelings. She smiled.

"Hello, Steve."

"Hello, Bry."

WE TOLD each other that we were looking well. Then we were in the silent parlor and our bodies came together and our lips met. Finally I held her back to look at her.

"Well!" she sighed. She sat down. "Do you have a cigarette?"

I lighted one for her. She took a couple of puffs before saying through her smile, "I came prepared to be brisk, businesslike, to ask if you had a job,

what you intended to do with yourself in the future. You moved too quickly for me."

"Would you believe that I intended to come to Greensboro as soon as I got a job?"

Her eyes and mouth released the smile, growing serious. She studied my face. "I've always believed it, Steve. I know the bargain my folks forced on you. It was cruel, unfair. Somehow we'll have to repay them every penny."

I pulled a chair close and sat down before her, reaching for her hands. "Lucy told me you were up and around, but she made it seem as if—"

"Lucy has been here?"

"Last night."

Bryanne laughed. "The dirty little plotter. I suppose she had a deal in mind. She told me she was driving down to the beach for a week. She probably guessed I was tracing you and managed to keep up with my progress so that she knew where you were about as quickly as I did."

Her glance curved up to lock with mine, her eyes deepened. "Steve, before things can be as they should, you'll have to forgive yourself."

"I can do that."

"You'll have to forgive the folks as well," she pleaded. "Try to understand them, Steve. From the beginning they've been fighting for something they thought belonged to them. They've been so sure that our wartime infatuation, as they called it, would blow over, but that before it did, it would cost a terrible price."

"Do they still feel the same way?"

"Yes, but they are not so sure now. They forced us apart. They're aware of my feelings. They also know that you seemed to be deliberately trying to destroy yourself. They'll still fight, but their punches will lose their sting. Forgive them, Steve, and give them an opportunity to stop fighting without losing face."

I thought of Lucy sitting in a room in the Bradley Hotel, claws unsheathed. I wasn't sure Lucy would interpret forgiveness as such. To her it would be calling her bluff. There was a big chance she would never follow the bluff through. Doing so would involve the Quavely name, indirectly, through the husband of a Quavely, in murder. But she might feel that the Quavely name was already involved. Forgiveness certainly entailed complications.

"You always admired a fighter, Steve," Bryanne said quietly. "They're fighters. You've seen only their worst side. They do have a good side. I know you'll never be close to them in your feelings, and I realize how much I am asking of you. But don't let them be an invisible barrier between you and me, Steve."

"I'll do the best I can," I promised.

She almost cried. Her lips held a tremulous smile.

"There are several things you must be told," I said.


As quietly as I could I gave her the whole story, including Lucy's threat.

"Leave Lucy to me," she said, when I'd finished. "I'll register at the Lang Park Hotel and get in touch with her. Steve, I'll be waiting. I can't tell you

[Turn page]

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how badly I feel because of this dreadful thing happening to Papa Joe. But don't worry about Lucy, darling."

I kissed her when the taxi came in answer to my phone call, and as I watched her go away I remembered what she had said. She would be waiting.

Chapter VII

EARLY in the afternoon, Vera came downstairs to take lunch up to Harold. While she was busy in the kitchen with Ellen, I went upstairs. Harold was standing at the front window looking at Hagan's stake-out across the street.

Harold was pale and tired. From the droop of his lower lip I guessed him to be in a sullen, petulant mood.

He asked what arrangements I'd made about the funeral. After I told him, I veered our talk abruptly.

"I want to hear about McGinty."

"What about him?"

"Everything."

"It was personal," he said curtly.

I wouldn't allow him to anger me. "Not too personal for you to hope that I covered traces of what happened in the vacant cottage."

He studied my face. "You're not going to drag that out before Hagan?"

"I've got to do something. I'm Hagan's boy so far. I've got a feeling that he'd have me in jail already if Wilfred hadn't disappeared to cast a small measure of uncertainty in the police mind."

Harold breathed deeply. "You can't prove anything to Hagan about McGinty. You'd only be hurting yourself."

"Not if McGinty and Papa Joe's death are tied together."

"They're not."

He didn't intend to talk; that much was clear, reflected in the hard light in his eyes, the set of his mouth. He still believed McGinty was dead, that I had spirited his body away. He believed I was too much involved to drag the McGinty angle before Hagan.

"I wish I could convince you of the truth, Harold," I said soberly. "And that truth is that McGinty will return."

Fear flared in his eyes. "Will you stop being so irrational?" he cried. "Stop tor-

turing me with impossibilities!"

I gave him a moment to calm down. "Then for such a large favor as you think I did for you," I said, "you should be prepared to do a small one for me."

"What is it?" he asked sullenly.

"Find Wilfred."

"Hagan will find him. Wilfred killed Papa Joe. That's obvious. When Wilfred is found Hagan will wring the truth out of him and this whole dirty thing will be over." His words carried all the conviction his wishful thinking could summon.

"All the more reason for finding Wilfred," I said.

"What makes you think I could find him?"

"Because I think Ellen knows where he is. You're the one person who might get it out of her. He hasn't run far, and he has let Ellen know where he is. This morning I found her fixing a plate of food, and it was not for herself. Not for me. She didn't bring it up here, did she?"

"No."

"Then who else but Wilfred? She wanted the food ready when she found the chance to slip it out to him."

"It's a slim premise."

"I know, but it's the only one I can think of. Will you talk to her?"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

I turned to leave the room. A small lump pressed against the sole of my shoe as I started to open the door. I moved my foot, reached down, and picked up a small leaden pellet that lay between the edge of the carpet and the wall. As I walked downstairs that pellet gave me ideas and the ideas brought excitement stirring inside me.

I was feeling equal to facing Hagan when he returned an hour later.

He took possession of the parlor and had Conroy summon us one by one. I walked into his presence at about three-thirty.

He was placid, even friendly, during the half-hour I spent with him. He did his best to turn the question session into a chatty period. I repeated the answers I had given him that morning. He made no mention of the arrival of a woman in a taxi. I hoped that meant he believed Bryanne to be one of the sym-

pathetic callers who'd besieged the house during the morning.

HAGAN made the pointed suggestion that none of us should entertain the thought of leaving town, no matter how urgent the business, until Papa Joe's death was cleared up. When I left him I had the distinct feeling that he had struck a dead end. I was still his man, but the hole was still a trifle square for the peg. He was playing out rope, waiting for a break, for someone to hang himself.

In the afternoon paper, the murder hit the front page. The heading was heavy and black, but the story was barren of real details.

Vera and Harold came downstairs and we formed a restless trio in the parlor until Harold excused himself. I caught his glance. He was going to see Ellen.

I kept Vera occupied with small talk. She was not at all reluctant to tell me about herself. She came from a small town in Michigan, she told me. After finishing college, she'd gone to New York with an eye on the publishing business. Nothing unusual. A girl of her beauty might have led a more exciting life.

When Harold returned, he gave me a short nod over her shoulder. After a while, he mentioned Papa Joe's financial affairs. "I wonder," he suggested, "if we'll find anything of value in that cottage Papa Joe owned on Hickory Street." The glance he gave me was meaningful.

I relaxed. There was nothing to do now but wait until darkness was heavy enough to cover my trip to the cottage.

I let an hour or more elapse after our quiet, desultory dinner before I set out for the cottage. Before leaving the house I turned off the light in the rear hallway, and opened the door to the back porch.

Standing in the shadows of the porch my gaze searched until it found Hagan's back yard stake-out. I was sure he would have one. The man was lounging on a stone bench near an old rock pool that was filled with leaves and dirt. Ellen would have seen the man and had not dared take a chance on slipping out. Wilfred was doubtless a hungry boy,

waiting for food that would not arrive.

A light summer breeze rushed across the yard. I let the sound of it in the trees cover any slight sounds I might have made as I eased off the porch, clinging to the shadow of the house.

I had one strip of side yard to cross between the house and trees. Once in the trees I made better speed, skirting the yard, taking to the weed-grown lots that lay between me and the cottage.

The cottage, when I reached it, was dark. I tried the back door and found it unlocked, giving me no purpose for the ring of keys I had filched from the pantry.

The floor creaked once as I entered. I stopped, listened, gripping the flashlight I'd picked up in Wilfred's room. I moved forward again, and there was a sudden burst of movement before me.

The light flared, catching Wilfred as he flung a desperate look over his shoulder while he lunged for the door across the room.

As he yanked the door open my fingers grabbed his collar. I jerked him back and he stood breathing thickly. His face was as white as dough, his eyes jutting in an oblique angle.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said quietly. He stood quivering like a beaten pup and watched me warily as I removed my hand from his collar and stepped back from him.

"Now let's sit down and talk this over like gentlemen." I found a ramshackle, dusty chair and pushed it toward him. He let his body come in stiff sitting contact with the edge of it.

"It was foolish of you to run, Wilfred."

He shook his head, breathing through his mouth.

"Let's go back over what happened," I said. "Last night Harold rushed into the house on Northland. A few moments later Papa Joe arrived. He spoke to Harold, then went to his room. A little while after that, Papa Joe called for you and you went up to him. After that—a blank, until Papa Joe was found this morning. What did Papa Joe want you for, Wilfred?"

"To get him a drink of whisky." He stopped, as if the words had expended all his energy.

I waited, and said finally, "Did you get it for him?"

Wilfred nodded. "I went downstairs first, but the bottle was gone from the buffet. It was the only bottle in the house, I thought. I remembered then that young Mr. Cranford took it to his room earlier in the day. When I went up to get it, I heard him and his wife wrangling, so I didn't go in."

"Why not? Were you more afraid of breaking in on Harold than of refusing Papa Joe's request?"

"I'll say not! But I happened to think of the pint of Old Seaman you put on your bureau when you came home yesterday. I'd brought me a glass from downstairs and a bottle of ginger ale. Instead of going to young Mr. Cranford's room for the whisky, I went to yours. The pint was still on your bureau."

MY HEART began hitting my ribs with a hammerlike beat at the implications his story was unfolding.

"You poured him a drink from the Old Seaman?"

"Yes, sir. A big drink, the kind he always liked. He threw it down his throat, made a face, and used the ginger ale for a chaser. Then he looked like somebody had hit him over the head with a club. He fell into a chair and looked at me, his eyes terrible, the color funny in his cheeks. He opened his mouth, but didn't say anything. Then he slid off the chair onto the floor."

Wilfred chewed the side of his lip. "I thought right away he was plumb dead and that I'd poisoned him even if I hadn't meant to. I was scared clean to my toenails. I just wanted to get away from there until they found out who did it. I was afraid that they'd catch me and wouldn't look any further. I slipped back this morning to tell Ellen I hadn't done it, and where I was, and for her to get me some grub." He touched my arm timidly. "Please don't take me back, Mr. Martin! I swear I didn't do it, even if it was me that gave him the whisky!"

"I believe you," I said. Tears welled in his eyes.

I waited a moment, and when the shaking ceased in his fat moon face and round shoulders, I reached in my pocket

for the lead pellet I'd found in Harold's room. I let the light play on the chunk of lead as I rolled it around in the palm of my hand.

Wilfred paled.

"You dropped one of the slugs," I said. "Did you carry the rest of them away with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I found you in Harold's room yesterday with his gun in your hand and a pair of pliers in your pocket. You went to his room with one purpose in your mind. You hated him with all the intensity of your being. You felt that only you could save your sister."

"She wouldn't listen to me," Wilfred said miserably.

"Yet for all your hate you were afraid to do anything to Harold directly. You knew he was in danger of some kind, going out armed to protect himself. You wanted to remove that protection, so you peeled the slugs out of his cartridges, leaving him with a gun loaded with blanks."

Wilfred hung his head sheepishly. "I thought it was pretty smart, Mr. Martin. Just everybody wouldn't have thought of it."

"Pretty underhanded, too."

"Yes, sir," he said.

I dropped the slug back in my pocket. My mind reviewed how it had happened here in the cottage. McGinty had hurled his body away from Harold's spitting gun, had reached the next room where he had tripped over a piece of furniture and fallen. Not knowing whether Harold had missed or whether he actually was mortally wounded, McGinty had realized his only chance lay in silence and in the hope that Harold would not follow him into the dark room and start shooting again.

When he had heard Harold rush out of the cottage, McGinty had allowed a few moments to elapse. Then he had got up and walked out, crossing the back yard along the general course of Harold's flight.

Little wonder the yard had not revealed McGinty's passage to me. I had been looking for a trail left by a crawling, dying man, not that of a man completely healthy, whole—and able to strike again!

Chapter VIII

PROBABLY it gave Wilfred a turn when I allowed him to stay in the cottage, for he'd expected a forced return to the Cranford house. I was certain, though, that he wouldn't run further now, and I didn't want him near Harold when I sprang the business about the doctored gun. I had a purpose for Harold. I was certain of the identity of the murderer, but the only way I could convince Hagan of my belief was to give him everything Harold also had to tell.

Harold was lingering in the lower hallway when I slipped back to the house. I guessed that he was waiting for me. I nodded. "Wilfred was in the bungalow."

"Did you learn anything? Does Wilfred know enough to get the police off our necks so Vera and I can settle Papa Joe's estate and get out of here?"

"Perhaps. At least he told me enough to prove to you that McGinty is still alive."

Harold's face tightened. "You and I both know what happened to McGinty," he said with a rasp in his voice. "What do you want—for me to say or do something that will guarantee you'll never be implicated?"

"We'll both know in a minute what happened to McGinty," I corrected. "Do you know you went to the bungalow with an unloaded gun?"

"Steve, you are crazy! I checked the gun."

"Naturally. You broke the cylinder of the revolver and there were the rims of five unfired bullets. You also heard the crashing of the gun in the bungalow. But Wilfred had already taken the teeth out of the bullets with a pair of pliers. Here is one of them. The rest he carried away." I held the slug up before his face between my thumb and forefinger.

He stared at the bullet. Then he took a deep breath to recapture his bravado. "What are you trying to make me admit with this cock and bull story?"

"Only the truth. For Hagan's ears."

[Turn page]



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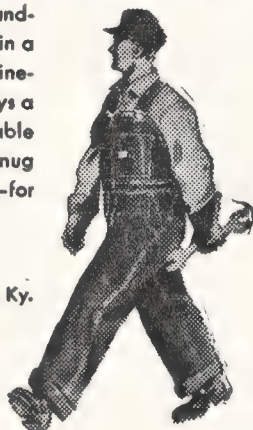
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"Good night, Steve."

My voice stopped him at the bottom of the stairs. "This thing is real, whether you want to believe it or not. McGinty will come again. Or he'll phone. He'll let you know that he's still alive, more determined than ever to nail you. A man who followed you all the way from New York won't give up easily. When he comes or calls, I'll be waiting, Harold. I'll do what I can to help you, in exchange for the truth."

His gaze stayed fastened to my face a moment longer, then he turned and mounted the stairs.

I went into the parlor. McGinty, I was certain, would not be long in bringing my prediction to pass. He had given Harold time to consider himself safe. Now was the psychological moment to strike.

I picked up a book, settled myself in an armchair under a lamp, and opened the yellow pages. I had read a dozen paragraphs before it occurred to me that I had not bothered to take a look at the title.

The phone rang at ten forty-five. I allowed it to scream three times before I picked up the receiver.

A heavy voice asked, "Cranford?" I heard a click as the extension in the upper hallway was raised from the hook.

The voice repeated, "Cranford?" And on the extension Harold asked, "What is it?"

I replaced the receiver and began to count the minutes. When five of them had passed, Harold and Vera came downstairs.

He was a picture of abject defeat, of utter misery, of nerves too long stretched beyond the snapping point.

He stood before me, his face a pale thing of hollow shadows. Vera stood beside him, not once taking her eyes from his face.

"McGinty phoned," he said.

"I know."

"What do you want me to say?" he asked dully.

"I want to know everything there is to know."

"All right." He looked around, as if searching for a place to sit down.

"And I want Hagan to know it later," I said.

THE effort to bring his ego into the battle revealed itself on his face. The effort failed, and he said in a limp voice, "It's the only way out. I can't go on with things as they've turned out to be. You'll guarantee your help?"

"All I'm able to give. Now for a few details. First, the girl. The one you painted after she tried to commit suicide off a dock one night."

"McGinty rescued her," he said.

"That much I know. He brought her into the café where you were eating and you saw the girl. Was it for the first time?"

"Yes," he said, speaking like a robot. "I asked her to come to my studio, and gave her the address. I didn't really expect her to do it, but she came. I started the portrait. I suppose she felt she was entering a brand new world. We—kidded around—"

He glanced at Vera, and a slow flush spread over his pallor. He looked at her, at her lovely blonde beauty, the swelling curves of her beautiful young breasts as emotion quickened her breathing, he looked at her slender waist and the smoothly turned thighs under her clinging frock—and he didn't know what to say, what he could say. Here was beauty and purity, the woman he wanted always to hold in his arms as he must now be remembering to have held her—how could he go on with a sordid story?

Suddenly he blurted, "Must we go into that, Steve? You're a man—you know how it is, h-how things can happen. I—I—" My silence was his answer, for he drew a long, hard breath and said, "Well, after that I introduced her to some of the people I knew. She was taken with the idea of being a model, and annoyed two or three artists who gave her an opening. All of them knew—they told me—that she was a wild little thing. Completely primitive, she was, but—but she could grip a man. Sex was her whole existence."

He stopped, his eyes alive with memories. He deliberately avoided looking at Vera now, though I had a feeling from a glance at her face that all this was no new story to her, though there might be something new in the telling.

"And where does McGinty re-enter?" I prompted.

"He fell in love with the girl. Probably it started for him when he found her there on the dock. He worshiped her. He married her."

"Is that so bad?"

"She was going to have a baby. My baby."

In the silence that crimped on the room only Harold's breathing was audible. I managed words after several seconds.

"And then?"

"She must have told McGinty about

see the spot I was in? I thought McGinty would cool off. He showed no disposition to do so, making my life hell with phone calls, following me on the streets. If I pulled the police back into it there was too strong a possibility of their discovering I had been in the apartment. Perhaps some pair of unknown eyes had seen me and would remember if circumstances were arranged just the right way. Perhaps they would call it murder. I thought I had shaken loose of McGinty when we drove down



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us—her and me, I mean. She hated me wildly after she had to tell him. She threatened all sorts of crazy things. Her last phone call was a demand that I see her. I went to the apartment where she and McGinty lived. She had worked herself into a half crazed state. I was there alone with her when she jumped—from a tenth story window."

His voice choked him. After a moment, he was able to go on.

"I'd been careful not to be seen entering the apartment, walking up all ten flights. I was even more careful when I left. McGinty found a cigarette stub in the apartment. She didn't smoke, and he smoked cigars. His suspicions fastened on me immediately. When he found out the brand of cigarettes I smoked, he was certain I'd been in the apartment. Of course, he took it to the police and they dragged me in. But the cigarette is a common brand and they had no proof that I'd been near the place. McGinty was different. He decided to force it from me—a confession of murder."

He brought his haggard gaze up. "Steve, I swear it was suicide, but you

from New York, but he was following, and must have been only an hour or so behind us."

For an instant fire gleamed again in his eyes. "You see what this has cost me? My work, my peace of mind, everything!"

That blow hit Vera the hardest. It hadn't cost him entirely everything until this moment when he had voiced the thought, reducing her love to nothing.

He said, "I was no more to blame than the girl from the wharf was. And I was wholly blameless for her death. She was destined for suicide. It was a part of the very fibers of her mind. She had tried it once, hadn't she?" A long silence followed his words. Then he said, "What will you do now to help?"

"I'll help you face it. It's the only way you'll ever get free of McGinty. Papa Joe's death was a mistake. The poison was intended for me—to insure my silence. Papa Joe killed himself."

HAROLD burst out, "He'd never commit suicide?"

"I didn't say that. He murdered himself. You and Papa Joe believed that

you'd murdered a man in the bungalow last night. You two believed that I was the lone witness who would speak, who did in fact state flatly that he would speak. You believed that I relented and removed McGinty for you. That left only Papa Joe to regard me as highly dangerous, desperately dangerous. He was fighting, remember, for his own flesh and blood, his only son, against a man he considered unspeakably inferior, an outsider.

"I can picture the working of his mind. He would meet me when I returned to the house, sound me out. If there was no chance at all that I'd keep my mouth shut, then he'd appear beaten and pour us a drink, in which he'd already dumped his sleeping capsules. Only he wouldn't drink his and later he'd force enough whisky down my gullet and over my clothes to make it seem that my efforts to turn alcoholic had succeeded only too well.

"McGinty would be spirited away, I would be found dead in my bed, and the doctor of Papa Joe's choice would have little reason to doubt Papa Joe's words as to my recent activities with a bottle. A death certificate would be quickly signed that would end it. But a drink from the wrong bottle spoiled it for Papa Joe. When Hagan has all the facts, he will have little trouble checking up to discover the truth of what I am saying. In the light of this knowledge, that weak motive he thinks I might have had for harming Papa Joe will go pale. Hagan will have method and means, the instrument of police science at his beckoning. For instance, there may be fingerprints on the Old Seaman bottle, or

little signs in Papa Joe's room, little signs all around for Hagan to read when he knows what to look for. Be that as it may, it's a chance we'll have to take, all of us."

Vera turned and started from the room. Harold pushed himself up out of his chair with her name on his lips. She stopped at the doorway, and he caught her hand. She looked at him. Yes, she was sure of her man—but not for the reasons she had believed.

He had lost her. She might stay with him; she might even grow old with him; but Harold had lost his beautiful Vera forever. As she moved again, the soft curves of her breast were as full and promising as ever, but their promise was no longer for Harold.

"Let's go upstairs," he pleaded.

She stepped aside to allow him to walk ahead of her.

She glanced back at me.

"You never know what tomorrow holds," I said. "I thought it was all over for me once, too."

She said nothing, but turned to follow Harold. I picked up the phone. There were two calls I had to make. The call to Hagan could wait a few minutes. First things first.

I dialed, and the room clerk at the Lang Park Hotel came on the wire.

"We do not have a Mrs. Bryanne Martin registered," he told me. "The only Martins registered are a Mr. and Mrs. Steven Martin."

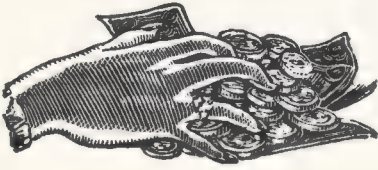
"Mrs. Steven Martin will do nicely," I said. "This is her husband calling."

While I waited for them to call her room, I thought, Mr. and Mrs. She registered for both of us. ● ● ●



STRANGE BEDMATES

IN COLUMBIA, S. C., a man and his wife were sleeping in their home when a stranger strolled in and got in bed with them. About 2:30 A.M. he told the husband to move over. The husband turned to his wife and said, "Who's that in bed with us?" The wife said, "I haven't the slightest idea." The husband fainted dead away. The wife ran to summon neighbors. While they were reviving the passed-out spouse, the intruder nonchalantly dressed and departed.



?

Are you guilty of **SHOVING THE QUEER**

By **NORMAN RENARD**

YOU don't have to be a big time counterfeiter with elaborate equipment and an extensive system of distribution to "shove the queer." No, indeed! An iron washer or a street car token is also classed as spurious currency when it is used for the purpose of defrauding.

For instance, at Bend, Oregon, the police have recently been troubled no end by petty chiselers who use every conceivable type of slug to steal time from parking meters in the downtown section. The chief of police there has got quite a collection of these bogus "coins" on hand, and they represent a sad commentary on the moral fiber of many otherwise respectable citizens.

Most of the offenders can be said to be only occasional thieves. Caught short on change, they resort to the use of sales tax tokens in the meters. But there are a few who deliberately set out to rook the city. These petty characters rack their brains to devise ever newer, more ingenious methods to keep from spending their own cash.

A case in point is that of a wise guy who hit on the novel expedient of tearing coin-size pieces out of matchbook covers and inserting them in slots meant for pennies and nickels. This was going too far, and the police set a trap for him. They nabbed him, too, right in the act! However, to make sure they were not letting themselves in for a lawsuit for

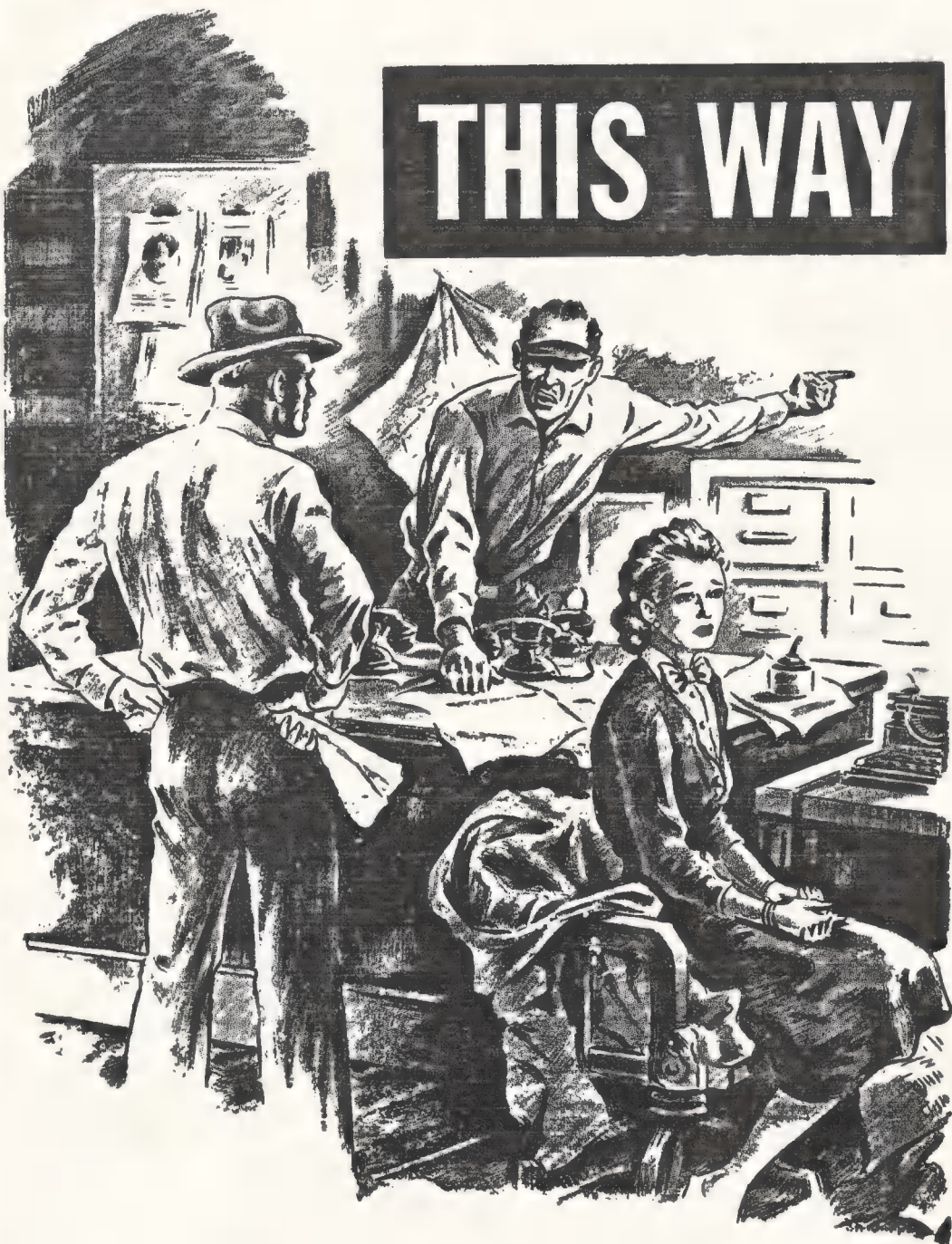
false accusation later on, they searched the suspect. In his pocket they found several torn matchbook covers. Upon comparison, the pieces he had used for coins were found to fit those torn covers perfectly. Arrested and fined \$20, he hasn't attempted his racket since.

Then there was the bright person who discovered that the little cork wafers in beer bottle caps are just as good a coin as any minted by Uncle Sam when it comes to snitching a little parking time. This one didn't push his luck too far but gave up before he felt the hot breath of the law on the back of his neck.

Another chiseling character used those small circular plastic counters which come with the game of tiddlywinks. He spent them quite generously, too. So generously, in fact, that the coppers around headquarters had enough of them on hand to engage in a little game of tiddlywinks, themselves, now and then.

This surreptitious practice of using sales tax tokens, metal slugs, or what-have-you to save a few pennies is bad enough, but what is much worse, it fouls up the parking meters so badly that they have to be repaired much more frequently than usual. Thus, in the long run, Mr. John Q. Public pays for this petty crime just as he does all crime—and that includes the trickery of our shover of the queer, too. ● ● ●

THIS WAY



The killing was a filthy mess, yet before reporter Gifford sat down to write its story—he shook hands with the slayer!

to the MORGUE

A Novel by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

Chapter I

MURRAY GIFFORD found himself sitting up in bed, muttering blasphemy and groping for the electric alarm clock in the darkness.

Its strident bell shrieked at him while he fumbled with the shut-off lever. The infernal clamor wouldn't stop. Resorting to drastic measures, he yanked the cord out by the roots and flung the damned contraption into the corner. The resulting crash pleased him. With a moan of relief, he dug luxuriously under the covers.

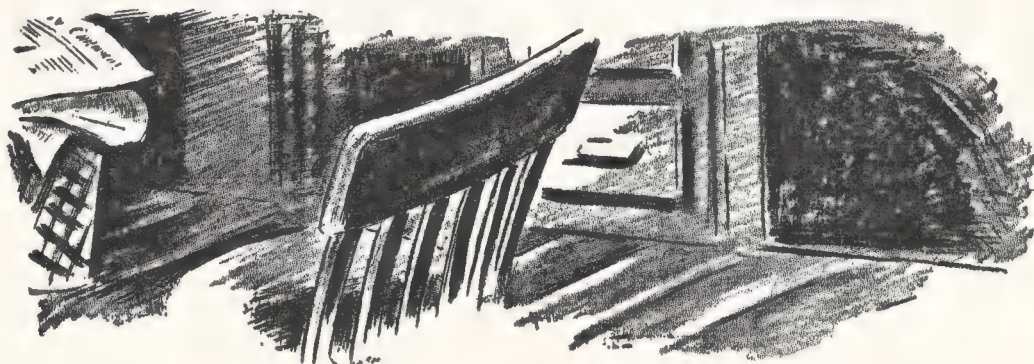
The bell kept ringing.

Gifford rolled over and profanely found the telephone. He longed to heave it into the corner after the clock, but the harsh voice he heard was one that commanded attention.

"The tip just came from the City Hospital," Gifford heard it saying. "Hop over to the Fletcher place right away and cover the story."

It was Hackett talking, Gifford's city editor on the *Queen City Chronicle*. The noise that came over the wire next sounded like the collapse of a brick wall. In reality, it was Hackett, breaking the

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connection. That was Hackett's way.

Gifford was in whole-hearted agreement with the general opinion that Hackett was the meanest city editor east of Hell. He wasn't merely tough; he was irascible, vituperative, vindictive, a bilious Tartar—*mean*. Moreover, Hackett had hung up an all-time record for firing reporters. He had fired scores of the best news-hawks in the business. There wasn't a reporter living, no matter how able, whom Hackett wouldn't fire at a moment's notice and upon the slightest pretext. Gifford was certainly no exception.

Gifford dragged himself out of bed. . . .

Chill, damp air puffed into his face while he drove across town, still three-quarters asleep. When he curbed his roadster in front of the Fletcher place, he blinked at his wristwatch and discovered, to his horror, that it was just five o'clock in the morning.

Six or eight cars were already there, most of them police machines. The Fletcher house was set amid expansive gardened grounds, but it was not the center of activity.

Gifford saw that something was going on at the rear of the estate. Several cops were prowling around the guest house, which was a bungalow located in a corner of the grounds. A member of the homicide squad was carefully pouring a plaster mixture into several footprints.

In the living room, the rest of the squad was busy with a camera, a flash-gun, and envelopes for the collection of evidence. An assistant medical examiner was scribbling his report. Wagging salutes at everybody, Gifford looked down at the corpse.

Immediately he was wide awake.

The body of Harvey Fletcher was sprawled in front of the fireplace. His garb was pajamas, bathrobe, and leather slippers. Yesterday, he had been a figure of political importance; but this morning, he was impressive in a far different manner.

He had met death violently. A revolver was clenched in his right hand, held there by cadaveric spasm. A poker was laying beside him, and this evidently had been the weapon of murder. His head didn't look like a head any more, and his face was almost entirely gone.

"A pretty messy way of killing a guy," a voice said beside Gifford, "but it worked."

THIS was the opinion of Detective Mike Hubbard. Hubbard had a hairless pate, weighed two-fifty in his red flannels, and was a good egg. He liked Gifford, probably because he envied Gifford the ability to sleep anywhere and at any time; and Gifford liked him because he was generous about passing out hot tips for the *Chronicle*.

"It happened less than two hours ago," Hubbard offered. "The ambulance men found Fletcher like that, dead, and Mrs. Fletcher over there on the sofa. She was wearing just a nightgown and a silk robe and she had four bullets in her. The two other bullets missed. There are the holes, over there in the wall. Fletcher's gun is empty."

The sofa still retained the impression of the woman's body. She had bled.

"Funny thing about this, Giff," Mike Hubbard said. "The murderer phoned for the ambulance."

"For *him*?" Gifford asked.

"No, for Mrs. Fletcher."

"Then Mrs. Fletcher wasn't killed?"

"Not quite enough," Hubbard said, shaking his shiny head. You can't say her husband didn't try, though. The ambulance rushed her right to the hospital, but she may not pull through."

"Why did the murderer phone for the ambulance?"

"Because Mrs. Fletcher was in such bad shape."

"At this time of the morning, I'm not in such good shape myself," Gifford remarked, "but I'm beginning to get the drift."

"Sure," Hubbard said, nodding. "But, of course, the murderer didn't wait around until the ambulance arrived. After he called the hospital, he scrambled. You know, the first ambulance didn't ever get here."

"The first?" Gifford yawned. "How many ambulances were there, anyway?"

"Two. You see, as soon as the hospital got this hurry-up call," Hubbard explained, "they sent one of their wagons right over. It was four blocks away, just turning into the avenue that leads to this place, when a coupé swung around

the corner from the opposite direction. The ambulance wasn't using its siren on account of there wasn't any traffic and they didn't want to wake up the whole neighborhood. Neither driver had any warning. The two cars sideswiped each other."

"Has this any bearing on the murder?" Gifford asked.

"Might have. The ambulance ran onto the sidewalk and smashed a fireplug. The other car kept right on going, hell for leather. But the driver of the ambulance got its number."

"Then you'll soon have the bird who was driving the coupé," Gifford observed.

"Sure. Some of the boys are picking him up right now. The ambulance was knocked out of commission, so the driver phoned back to the hospital. The hospital sent out a second ambulance. That one got here all right. When they found Fletcher dead and Mrs. Fletcher all shot up, they phoned headquarters."

"Mike," Gifford said, "when you grab the driver of that coupé, will you tip me off right away?"

"Sure," Detective Hubbard said.

Gifford was asking questions and making notes when Timmy Russell came in from outside. She had eyes the color of cornflowers and hair like spun taffy. She was as luscious a package as any girl reporter could possibly be, in Gifford's opinion; but in common with all Hackett's hirelings, she worked in constant dread of being booted out of her job. As she came up to Gifford, she seemed full of an uneasy urgency.

"Hello, sweet," Gifford said.

"Hello, Giff. I got here a little ahead of you, as usual. I've been working on the servants and the neighbors. If you've got everything you need, let's go."

WHILE Gifford drove, Timmy sat snugly beside him, huddling out of the damp wind. He closed one hand over hers, but she didn't pay any attention. She seemed preoccupied.

"Look," said Gifford, "this is the biggest story that's ever broken my way. I'm going to town on it. Maybe Hackett will give me a raise. Miracles do happen. Then we can be married, can't we?"

"That would be nice," Timmy mur-

mured. "Marriage built on murder. Giff, please don't ask me again to marry you."

"Timmy," Gifford said, "I love you like hell. I know I'm not getting to first base with you, but if there's some other guy, I want to know about it."

Timmy was silent.

"Listen," Gifford said, "what the hell's the matter with you?"

"I was just thinking," Timmy said quietly, "that there ought to be a signpost on the primrose path. A special sign, reading 'This Way to the Morgue'."

Troubled, Gifford mulled that over. Timmy was in no mood to explain the cryptic remark, and he couldn't divine its meaning. She was still silent when they went into the city room together.

Chapter II

IT WAS busy. The rest of Hackett's slaves were laboring at their desks. Typewriters and teletypes were clattering. In the air was a feeling of strict regimentation that sprang directly from Hackett's presence.

Hackett was behind his desk in the corner, pouring water from a tumbler into a window-box in which four rose bushes were putting out buds. It was a curious thing about Hackett, the affection he lavished upon those roses. He was a city editor, hated reporters and everything else connected with newspapers, but those bushes were his pets.

When he turned from them to face Gifford and Timmy Russell, his lean face hardened, and his eyes took on a steely glint. "Let's have it," he said in his nerve-wearing rasp.

At a glance from Gifford, Timmy began. "Louise Fletcher had a lover," she said.

"Sure of that? I want facts, not rumors."

Timmy nodded, her blue eyes cast down at her notes. "It's perfectly understandable. Harvey Fletcher drank too much and was ugly to her. He thought of her as something to show off, like his diamond studs. Louise was fifteen years younger, lovely and sweet and fine. When she married him five years ago, she was hypnotized by his money and his power, but that wore off. She'd turned to another man. She'd taken to meeting this

man in the guest house, very late at night."

"Who is he?"

"Nobody knows that," Timmy answered, still looking down, "because they kept their affair almost a perfect secret. But the neighbors noticed lights in the cottage sometimes and that the blinds were pulled. Once the cook saw Louise running into the house at dawn and then, a little later, she saw a man hurrying out of the guest cottage."

"Did you get a description of that man?"

Timmy shook her taffy head.

"Why not? Get it!"

"The cook couldn't give me any description. Somehow, Harvey Fletcher must have come to suspect what was going on. He must have been looking for a chance to catch Louise and her lover together. Last night he must have heard her leave the house to keep a rendezvous at the cottage. He took his gun with him and—"

Timmy looked at Gifford with a strange flicker in her eyes, and Gifford went on from there.

"This is the way it must figure out," he said. "Fletcher caught Louise waiting in the cottage. He'd been drinking heavily. He shot at her six times, emptying his gun, and four of the bullets hit her. He obviously meant to kill her on the spot, but she's still alive. At that point, Louise's lover showed up."

Hackett was listening in his cold-faced, challenging way that demanded Gifford be sure of every fact.

"This man gave Fletcher the works," Gifford continued. "He used the first weapon within reach, a poker from the fireplace. After he'd laid Fletcher out, he saw that Louise was in desperate need of medical care, so he phoned for an ambulance. Then he beat it."

"Any clues pointing to that man's identity?"

"Only a couple of footprints," Gifford answered. "As for suspects, the field is wide open. Fletcher was a public figure who was always going around to balls and banquets, and Louise might have met this man at any one of a hundred different places. The guilty man might be almost anybody."

"Miss Russell," Hackett ordered

brusquely, "go straight over to the hospital. If Louise Fletcher is able to talk, get her story. If not, get everything else you can, all about the call for the ambulance, and especially her condition. Make the most of the woman angle. Get back here as soon as you can."

GIFFORD watched Timmy, still silent and troubled, hurry out of the city room.

"As for you, Gifford," Hackett said, his voice even sharper, "make a supreme effort and exert yourself to stay awake. You'd be a fairly good reporter if you weren't so infernally lazy."

Gifford colored. "It isn't really laziness, it's a craving for sleep," he said. "You see, when I was a kid, I worked night and day. About the time you became city editor, I was selling the *Chronicle* on the streets all night long, trying to hold down another part-time job, and struggling through school at the same time. I guess that's why I don't ever seem to be able to get enough sleep. But—"

"I don't want excuses," Hackett broke in sharply. "Give me your copy as fast and as good as you can turn it out. If you fall down on this job, you're finished. That's all."

Gritting himself to do his best, Gifford turned to his desk. His telephone was ringing. As he shuffled through his notes, he scooped up the receiver. The call was from Mike Hubbard.

"Get set for the fireworks, Giff," Hubbard said.

Gifford tightened. "What's the break?"

"I told you I'd tip you off when we grabbed the guy who smashed up the ambulance. Well, we've grabbed him, and he turns out to be a hell of a lot more than just a hit-and-run driver."

"Give it to me, Mike."

"You're getting it. We picked this guy up at his home, through his license number, see? Well, while we were questioning him down here at headquarters, one of the boys brought in the casts of the footprints from the Fletcher place. I played a strong hunch and compared the casts with the guy's shoes. They fit—fit perfectly."

"You mean you've already nailed the

bird who killed Fletcher?" Gifford demanded.

"We have, Giff, we certainly have."

"Good Lord! Who is it?"

"Carl Hackett," Hubbard said.

Gifford sat motionless a moment, trying to believe he had heard the name correctly.

"My boss's son?" he asked quietly at last.

"Sure," Hubbard said. "Your boss's son."

For a full minute after he broke the connection, Gifford sat looking at Hackett. Hackett was slashing his blue pencil through a mess of copy, scowling and

"They'll try to beat me with it. Damned if I'll let them. We'll put out an extra, the fastest extra that ever came off our presses. Write the lead, Gifford. Never mind the full story until the regular mail edition. Damn you! Get to work."

The whiplash of Hackett's savage tone drove Gifford to his desk. He got to work.

While he poked at his ancient typewriter, he glanced frequently at Hackett. Hackett was phoning the composing room, the press room, the distribution, and demanding action. And action was what he was going to get, even before



HOME WAS NEVER LIKE THIS

Cheboygan, Michigan, had a "disappearing" gambling den. From the outside the place appeared to be a little white cottage. But inside, the gambling room was fitted with a winch and cable machinery like a freight elevator. When a police raid appeared imminent, a pull of the switch lowered the whole works into the basement.

—Jack Benton

cursing the poor devil who had turned it in. Gifford knew he couldn't evade this thing. He had to tell Hackett. He rose quietly and went over to Hackett's desk.

"They've got him already," Gifford said.

"Who?"

"The man who killed Fletcher."

"Who?" Hackett spat.

"Your son."

Across Hackett's lean face came the hardest expression Gifford had ever seen on a human being. It was shock and dismay and incredulity, all held back by a fierce and chill self-control. Hackett's thin hands gripped the arms of his chair, and he half rose. Gifford thought Hackett was going to hit him. But Hackett didn't.

"Carl?" he said in a harsh, hollow tone.

Gifford nodded.

Hackett sank back into his chair, his eyes blinded by restrained rage. Sweat broke out on his forehead. After a moment, he was able to see Gifford again.

"Has the *Bulletin* got this?"

"They must have it. They're questioning your son down at headquarters now."

he hurried down to headquarters to see his son.

IT WASN'T the printer's ink in his blood that was making Hackett do this. It was sheer vindictiveness. He hated the owner of the *Bulletin*. The owner of the *Bulletin* had once been a reporter under Hackett. Hackett had fired him for incompetence, just as he had fired scores of other first-class newsmen who had subsequently risen to positions of distinction in the Fourth Estate. But years later that reporter, Owen Watson, had inherited a fortune, had bought the *Bulletin*, and had begun to cut into the *Chronicle's* prestige with a vastly improved paper.

Finding himself seriously challenged by a former underling whom he still held in contempt, Hackett had conceived an uncompromising hatred for Owen Watson. "Beat the *Bulletin*" was the precept that fired Hackett during his every waking hour. But it wasn't merely professional competition. On Hackett's part, it was determination to vanquish the man behind the *Bulletin*.

Mean as his boss was, Gifford knew that Hackett was suffering agony now.

He had to get out that extra and beat the *Bulletin* before he could hurry down to his only son's aid. Page by page, the copy boy flicked Gifford's story from his typewriter to Hackett's desk. Hackett knifed it in blue and shot it down to the composing-room. Between pages, he grimly made phone calls.

Gifford caught the name of Booth. Andrew Booth was the biggest lawyer in the state. Hackett was retaining him for Carl.

"I haven't any money," Gifford heard Hackett snarl. "I haven't been able to save one damned cent. But I'll get it for you. Somehow I'll get it."

Hackett had his coat on by the time the last page of Gifford's copy went down the tube.

"Now write the rest of it," he snarled. "Edit it yourself for the mail edition. Remember, I'm putting out a decent newspaper. If you put through a lot of sloppy stuff, I'll ram it down your throat. After that, start covering headquarters."

He left the city room with a slam.

While the big presses rolled down in the basement, spinning out the extra, Gifford banged out the full story. To his surprise, he found himself feeling sorry for Hackett. He wondered why. There wasn't a single reason why anyone on the *Chronicle* staff should like the man. Perhaps Gifford felt sympathy because Hackett was so friendless. Perhaps, too, it was because Gifford knew, somehow, that Hackett was really human inside. Whatever the reason was, he didn't have time to think about it much. He had the job of his life to do and a doubly acrimonious boss to do it for.

Just as Gifford dropped the last of his copy into the tube, the extras came up from the press room. The headline was a full-page shout: Fletcher Killed After Shooting Wife; Carl Hackett Held—written by the accused man's father.

On the faces of those in the city room appeared strange expressions, half stunned, half grimly glad.

Chapter III

HURRYING into police headquarters, Gifford found Hackett and the lawyer, Booth, in the office adjoining Detec-

tive Hubbard's. Booth was a big man of impressive poise and presence, but he was obviously troubled. Hackett was sitting still, holding himself in. There were voices in the next room. Gifford stood aside quietly, realizing that Hackett hadn't yet been permitted to see his son.

Hackett rose stiffly when a door opened. Detective Hubbard beckoned. Hackett brushed Booth aside and strode into the next office. Gifford followed him.

Hackett paused then, facing the young man who was sitting wearily beside the desk in the center of the room.

"Hello, Dad," Carl Hackett said quietly.

Hackett drew a chair to face his son. The hardness, the meanness went out of his bearing. Before Gifford's eyes, he changed amazingly; and it was Carl Hackett who caused the change. It was like the transformation that came over Norman Hackett when he tended his roses, but it was far deeper.

Carl Hackett, Gifford thought, was a right guy by anybody's standards. He didn't fit into this picture at all. There was something definitely wrong about his getting pulled up for murder.

"You don't have to tell me you didn't do it, Carl," Hackett said gently. "I know you didn't."

Carl looked straight into his father's eyes. "I don't know anything about it," he said.

"Those footprints they've got aren't yours?"

"No."

"Was it your car that smashed into the ambulance?"

"No."

"Where had you been last night? What did you do?"

"A bunch of us went to the Hide-away." This was a roadhouse, several miles outside of town, in the opposite direction from the Fletcher place. "We had a few drinks and danced a while and then left."

"Who was there with you?" Hackett asked.

"Well—Barry Watson."

Gifford saw Hackett wince. Barry Watson was Owen Watson's son—the son of the owner of the *Bulletin*. To Gifford it seemed natural that Carl and

Barry should be friends, but the fact that they were, he saw, was gall to Hackett. Perhaps Hackett expected, as a matter of loyalty, that his son should share his hostility toward the Watsons. But being the sort he was, Carl didn't.

Hackett asked quickly, his voice taking on an edge, "How does Barry Watson enter into this?"

"Why, not in any way. It was simply that we were all there together, the usual gang, having a good time. The others stayed, but Barry and I left together."

"In the same car, your car?" Hackett demanded, his voice sharpening.

"No; he had his, and I had mine. I drove straight home and went to bed."

Gifford touched Hackett's shoulder. "Let me ask a question," he said. He asked it of Carl. "About a week ago, I dropped in at the Hideaway. Barry Watson was there that night with some of his usual crowd. I know he's separated from his wife, so when I heard them kidding him about a girl, I listened in. They were saying they knew he'd found himself a new girl—asking who she was and why he never brought her around and why all the secrecy. Do you know anything about it?"

"Just that much," Carl said. "Not any more than that. It couldn't have anything to do with—this."

Hackett peered at Gifford during a moment of silence, then turned again to his son.

"Then you deny having had anything to do with the murder, Carl?"

"Certainly. I deny the whole thing."

DETECTIVE HUBBARD and Andrew Booth had been talking quietly in the outer office. At that moment they came in. Booth looked more troubled than before.

"Mr. Hackett," Hubbard asked casually, "did you hear Carl come home last night?"

"Yes," Hackett said, "I did."

"What time was it?"

"About—two o'clock."

A sick expression came over Carl's face; and the detective wagged his polished head.

"A good try, but I'm afraid it's no go, trying to cover him," Hubbard said.

"Carl himself said it was about three. But what time did he actually get there? It was about four, wasn't it?"

Hackett jerked to his feet. "You can't make me do that!" he rasped. "You can't trick me into saying things that you can use against my son!" He turned to face Booth. "Listen to Carl's story! The boy's innocent, and he's got to be cleared."

"I'm going to talk with him now," the lawyer said dubiously.

Hubbard remained in the inner office with Carl while Gifford followed Hackett and Booth into the next room. The lawyer rubbed his chin.

"I'm afraid you're asking me to do an impossible thing, Mr. Hackett," he said. "At the moment, I can't see any grounds for preparing a presentable defense."

Again Hackett was inside his thorny shell. His face was set, and his eyes were icy. "If you aren't able to clear that boy," he said harshly, "I'll hire another lawyer who can do it."

"Just as you wish. I confess I'm not eager to go ahead with this case, but I'll reserve my decision until after I've talked with Carl," Booth answered. "Consider the evidence—solid, material evidence that will stand up in any court. It's very foolish of Carl to deny everything, because he *was* at the Fletcher place and when he was rushing away, following the murder, he *did* smash into the ambulance."

Hackett's fists closed.

"When the police arrested Carl," the lawyer went on, "they found him fully dressed and extremely upset. There was mud on his shoes. The footprints left at the edge of the garden near the Fletcher guest house match his shoes exactly. In the face of that fact, his denial only makes his guilt all the more certain. And you see, Mr. Hackett, I can't plead self-defense for him, because the gun Fletcher had was empty—useless."

Gifford was thinking that Louise Fletcher was lovely and young, only a little younger than Carl.

"When Carl collided with the ambulance, his car was damaged," Booth continued gravely. "One of his headlights was smashed. The police found fragments of a headlight lens at the scene of the accident, and the pieces fitted per-

fectly into the pieces left in the headlight of Carl's coupé. He was so desperate to get away, you see, that he didn't dare stop and—"

"Listen to me!" Hackett cut in. "I tell you that boy didn't kill Fletcher. The evidence lies. Somewhere there must be grounds for a reasonable doubt, and you've got to find it."

"I'll do my best," Booth said gravely.

After the lawyer went into the room where Detective Hubbard was again questioning Carl, Hackett stood a moment, staring at the door. Turning, he gestured sharply to Gifford. He didn't speak until they paused outside the revolving doors of headquarters.

"Carl's a damned decent sort," Gifford said. "Perhaps a bit too decent for his own good. He'd never do or say anything that might get a pal into trouble. I don't believe he could bring himself to the point of accusing a friend of murder."

Hackett looked hard at Gifford. "Carl's like that," he agreed tersely. "It just isn't in him."

"Even if Carl was suspected of a murder himself, as he is," Gifford went on, "he'd keep quiet and rely on his friend to come forward and straighten things out. I think he's doing that very thing right now. The trouble is, it's putting him in one hell of a jam. Booth's right. That evidence is enough to send him to the chair, no matter how he may change his story later."

HACKETT'S tone bored into Gifford's ears. "You mean that even if Carl knows who's guilty, even if he comes to the point of accusing that man, the evidence against him is so strong that nobody will believe him."

Gifford nodded soberly. "It's possible, too damned possible. It's even worse than that. Suppose the guilty man confesses. Will that save Carl, as matters stand? It's doubtful. It's a fact of law that an uncorroborated confession has absolutely no weight in court. An uncorroborated confession, mind you. Every word of it may be the truth, but it's worthless unless there are facts, or evidence, or testimony, to back it up. Those are hard lines, but—"

"I know all that," Hackett snapped.

"If Carl changes his story, it won't help him now. If he accuses the guilty man, it'll mean nothing. Even if the murderer admits the crime, there must be substantial proof of what he says before Carl can be cleared. Yes, I know all that."

"The news is all over town by now," Gifford said quietly, "and nobody's coming forward to take the blame off Carl's shoulders."

"Listen to me, Gifford. We're newspaper men, not detectives, but we've got to dig into this. We may be able to prove that Carl is innocent, some way, without actually finding the guilty man. It may be that the only possible way is to collar the real murderer. I don't give a damn what's necessary, we've got to clear Carl."

"We have only one lead—"

Gifford broke off because Hackett was turning away. Stiffly, Hackett went to his car. There were newsboys, running along the street, peddling the *Chronicle* extra, shouting the headlines that damned Carl Hackett as a murderer—headlines that Carl Hackett's father had written because he had to write them in order to beat the *Bulletin*.

Chapter IV

NEEDED of sleep weighed heavily upon Gifford, but he was striving valiantly to keep awake. He'd been on the job constantly; he'd been up all night. It was again a horribly early hour in the morning. The break in the Fletcher murder case had come twenty-four hours ago.

The little hospital room was quiet. There was a bed in it, but the bed was occupied by Timmy Russell. She was fully clothed and—how Gifford envied her!—sleeping soundly.

Norman Hackett was standing at the window, rigid and grim, staring out into the deep darkness that presages dawn. Detective Hubbard, at ease as always, was patiently twiddling his thumbs. But it was a long and trying vigil they were keeping.

In the next room, two doctors were attending Louise Fletcher. She was sinking, they had said; but moments of lucidity came to her, and it was possible that she might summon enough

strength to talk.

Gifford was studying the *Chronicle's* final. The headlines shouted that Andrew Booth had declined to enter the case. In bitterness and in desperation, Hackett had written that headline, too. Another scare-head announced that the district attorney had promptly presented his evidence to the grand jury and that the grand jury was expected to return its decision in the morning. All this Gifford had read and reread, but in the hope of discovering some flaw in the case, he was reading it again.

Timmy's story had been combined with his. Her coverage of the hospital angle was complete and, because she was working for Hackett, accurate. She had competently included several paragraphs concerning the murderer's telephone call to the hospital and the dispatching of the ambulances:

The hospital records show that the first ambulance left for the Fletcher home at 3:22 a.m. Upon receiving the report of the collision, the hospital sent out the second ambulance twenty-three minutes later. This ambulance is reported as having arrived at the Fletcher place at 4:15. This time is also recorded at police headquarters as the moment at which the first news of the murder was received.

Footfalls in the hallway caused Gifford's eyes to lift. Looking out, he saw Barry Watson moving with quiet nervousness past the room in which Louise Fletcher lay dying. Dropping the paper, Gifford followed him. They paused together at the window at the end of the corridor.

"Anything breaking, Gifford," Watson asked.

Gifford yawned. "Not yet. You're covering this for the *Bulletin*, of course."

Gifford looked at Barry Watson curiously. He was handsomer, in a virile, masculine way, than any other reporter Gifford had ever seen. He had the strength and the lithe grace of an athlete. Gifford's eyes held to his during a moment of uneasy silence.

"Certainly," Watson said then. "Why else would I be here? You may remember my father owns the *Bulletin*."

"Thought you might be a friend of Louise Fletcher."

"I know her slightly."

Gifford was trying to seem casual. "You don't believe Carl did it, do you?"

"No, I don't. But it's hard to get around that evidence."

GIFFORD nodded. "Assuming Carl is innocent, there's only one thing to think. He's covering somebody. And whoever he's covering, that man is willing to let him take the rap."

Watson said nothing.

"That's hellishly lousy," Gifford said quietly. "It's betraying a real loyalty. Carl's left holding the bag. Whoever he's covering isn't worth it. Any man would have come forward right away if he wasn't an out-and-out rat. But then, I don't suppose any man wants to go to the chair if he can possibly avoid it."

Still Watson was silent.

"As I said to Hackett," Gifford went on, trying to sense Watson's reactions, "the field's wide open so far as suspects are concerned. If Carl wasn't in the picture, you could point to almost any man in town and challenge him to produce an alibi. Not one man in a thousand could do it. For instance, I was at home in bed at the time of the murder, but I can't prove it. How about you, Watson?"

Watson said flatly, "The same with me."

"Carl said that you and he left the Hideaway at the same time that morning. It must have been about two o'clock, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"If circumstances demanded it," Gifford insisted, "could you prove you drove straight home and went right to bed?"

Watson offered Gifford a cigarette and when Gifford refused, put one in his mouth but left it unlighted. "I couldn't produce any witnesses," he said.

"There you are," Gifford said. "Eliminate Carl, and anybody is suspect. You know, Watson, I've a theory about this case. Off the record, of course—not for the *Bulletin* to print. But you probably wouldn't print it, anyway."

Watson looked at him again with sharper curiosity. "What do you mean by that?"

"Suppose," Gifford went on, watching Watson keenly, "that among the party at the Hideaway was a certain man.

Suppose this man is married but separated from his wife. While the divorce is hanging fire, this man falls in love with another woman. Not wanting to invite trouble, he meets his new girl secretly."

Watson said nothing while Gifford unmistakably described him. "Being smart, this man doesn't take her out among his friends, doesn't even mention her to them. But his friends, for some reason, suspect that there is a new girl in his life and they kid him about her, tease him, try to find out who she is. Of course, he keeps mum and takes it. That situation isn't very hard to imagine so far, is it, Watson?"

Watson's eyes merely narrowed at Gifford.

"As I say," Gifford continued, his nerves tightening. "Carl and this man are among the party at the Hideaway. This man—let's call him Jones—leaves early. Carl gets the idea that Jones is going off to meet the girl. He thinks it would be good fun to follow Jones and find out who the girl is or, at least, where she lives. So he does. He trails Jones to a rendezvous where Jones usually meets his sweetheart. But on this particular night, he runs smack into a murder."

Watson's lips pinched hard on the cigarette.

"Carl isn't the kind who would peep; he wouldn't spy on Jones and the girl. But suppose he's right there, near by, when he hears a series of gunshots. The

next minute he sees Jones rushing away. Knowing Carl as well as you do, Watson, you can easily imagine what his reaction would be when he learned that a good friend of his had committed a murder. He'd do just what he's doing now—sit tight and say nothing. What do you think of that theory?"

Watson turned to face Gifford squarely.

"If you won't answer that question," Gifford said, his lips drawn against his teeth, "perhaps you'll answer another. What size shoe do you wear?"

SUDDENLY Watson's left hand gripped Gifford's shoulder; his right, closed hard, poised to drive squarely into Gifford's face. There was fierceness in his eyes, and his jaw was clenched. Gifford stiffened, backing away, and his own fists lifted. But neither of them struck. At that moment a quiet voice called down the corridor:

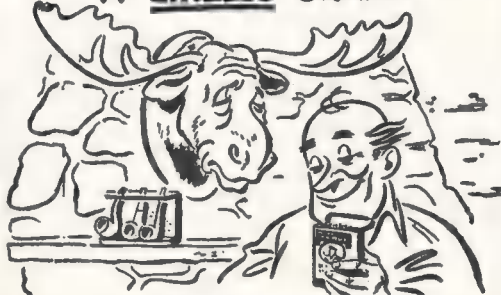
"Giff!"

Both men looked around quickly. Timmy Russell was standing outside an open door. Sleep had disarrayed her taffy hair delightfully, but her eyes were anxious. Watson released Gifford as she gestured to them. With an electrical charge of hostility between them, they strode toward her.

The vigil had ended. Hackett and Hubbard were no longer waiting. They had gone into the room where Louise Fletcher lay. Timmy followed them first; Gifford and Watson went in after her.

THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



TAKE ONE WHIFF!
(FOR THIS YOU'VE YEARNED!)

IT PACKS RIGHT



PACK YOUR PIPE
NOW YOU HAVE EARNED

The hush was deeper here.

Hackett and the detective were at the side of the bed. Two doctors, their faces grave, were watching their patient from the opposite side. Louise Fletcher was an inert figure beneath the immaculate sheet. Her finely molded face looked waxen in contrast to the bronze hair splashed on the pillow. Her lips were colorless and trembling; her eyes were open but veiled, as if they were looking into a faraway dream.

Hackett's hands opened and closed tensely as Hubbard bent gently over the woman.

"Mrs. Fletcher," the detective said in a kindly tone, "can you hear me?"

Louise Fletcher's eyes moved mistily until they found Hubbard's face, but her lips did not open.

"It's very important that you tell us everything you can, Mrs. Fletcher," Hubbard said. "We must know who the man was."

The woman's eyes closed.

Abruptly Hackett brushed the detective aside and stepped closer to the head of the bed. One of his lean hands reached down to grip Louise Fletcher's shoulder. The rasp of his voice came as a shocking sound.

"Tell them the truth! It wasn't Carl. You know it wasn't Carl. Tell them the truth! Do you hear me? Tell them!"

Hubbard pulled Hackett back, Hackett resisted, but grew quiet as one of the doctors stepped quickly to the woman's side. The grating of Hackett's voice

must have penetrated the dark fog of Louise Fletcher's mind, for her lips opened.

But they made no sound, no sound, save a long, slow breath.

It was the last breath that Louise Fletcher would ever draw. . . .

This was what they had been waiting for, through all the long, tiring hours of the night—these few seconds that had yielded not the dimmest spark of light.

Gifford's throat was dry as he watched Hackett turn from the bed. Hackett moved leadenly, his eyes full of despair. He walked from the room as if he were turning his back upon his last hope.

Gifford lingered. He didn't move, even when Timmy went out, twisting her handkerchief and biting her lips. His eyes were fixed upon Barry Watson. Keen and speculating, they followed young Watson's quick stride down the corridor until the man passed from sight. Then, quiet and purposeful, Gifford left.

Chapter V

THE moment he entered the city room, Gifford heard his name rasp from Hackett's lips.

Hackett was at his desk, slashing at a page of copy. The haggardness of his face made it look even harder, even more inhuman. Gifford was beginning to learn that the tougher Hackett's shell became,

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



—HAPPINESS FOR ALL CONCERNED!
—with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



*It costs
no more
to get
the best!*

the more Hackett was suffering inside. He strode directly to the desk.

"You're two hours late!" Hackett snarled. "You know I expect punctuality, especially now. You've been asleep on the job, you damned loafer. You've been wasting time while—"

"Hold it," Gifford said wearily. "I haven't had a wink of sleep since you phoned me night before last. I expect to fall on my face at any moment, but I've been working. I've got something. If it isn't enough to establish a reasonable doubt in Carl's case, I'm crazy—from lack of sleep."

Hackett jerked erect. "Do you mean that?"

"Damned right, I mean it."

"Let's have it!"

Drawing a chair close, Gifford glanced around. Timmy was at the nearest desk. She was looking at him, so worn and so unhappy that Gifford wanted to take her in his arms. She didn't answer his smile. She just kept looking at him as he sagged into the chair.

"Let's have it, Gifford!"

Gifford rubbed his blue-whiskered chin. "Down at headquarters you heard me ask Carl about Barry Watson. Last night I grabbed a chance to get at Watson directly. I tried to find out if he could account for himself at the time of the murder. He was evasive and suspicious, so much so that I've been checking up on him."

Hackett demanded with a rasp, "What did you find out?"

"That Barry Watson didn't go directly home from the Hideaway. That Barry Watson didn't actually get home until some time after Fletcher had been murdered. That Barry Watson wears a shoe sized—"

Hackett gripped Gifford's arm. "Are you sure of that? Absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely." Gifford sighed. "He left the Hideaway at the same time as Carl. It was a few minutes after two o'clock. From that time until almost four-thirty, when he reached home, his whereabouts and actions are entirely unaccounted for."

Hackett's question lashed at Gifford. "How do you know Barry Watson didn't get home until four-thirty?"

"I found out from the man who lives in the house next door—Philip Wetherman, of the First National Bank. Wetherman's bedroom window is directly above the Watson driveway. He was awakened by the noise of the car when Barry Watson drove into the garage. He looked at the clock and saw the time. Watson's on the day trick over at the *Bulletin*, except when something unusual breaks, but Wetherman says he has frequently heard young Watson pulling in just before dawn."

"How does Wetherman know it was Barry Watson and not Owen Watson?"

"He says he has been disturbed so much because the driveway is so close to his house that he's learned the difference in the sounds of the two Watson cars."

"What do you mean, Barry Watson's actions and whereabouts are entirely unaccounted for?"

"I cornered him with this," Gifford said, his eyes narrowing. "I went straight over to the *Bulletin* plant and nailed him with it. He had only one answer to all my questions. He told me to go to hell."

Hackett's eyes were a savage gleam. "That has no connection—"

"But *this* has," Gifford broke in. "Last night I asked Barry Watson what size shoe he wears, and he damned near socked me. This morning I found out for myself. I tramped around from one store to another until I found the one where Barry Watson buys his shoes. Hackett, it's the same store your son patronizes. What's more, Barry Watson and Carl wear exactly the same size shoes, the same length, the same width. That's enough to cast doubt on the footprint evidence, isn't it?"

WRITE it!" Hackett's tone whipped at Gifford. "Write it, but be careful. We can't flatly accuse Barry Watson of murder. His father's paper would sue us to death. We'll have to disguise his identity in at least this first story. But we can set the police to investigating him. We can prove to the whole damned world that the footprint evidence is questionable. It'll undermine the state's case. Write that, Gifford!" Gifford hesitated. "I can't help pointing

out that this really isn't adequate proof of Barry Watson's guilt."

Hackett's fists smashed to the desk. "That's of no importance. I don't give one good damn whether we can pin the murder on Barry Watson or not. What we're going to do is wreck the case against Carl, no matter who the hell it hurts. Get to work!"

Gifford found new energy in the desperate urgency of Hackett. He hurried to his desk, flung off his coat, tilted his hat, loosened his tie. He was full of fire—the realization that this was the biggest exclusive story he could ever hope for.

He spun a sheet of paper under the roller of his typewriter. On that piece of paper he was going to plaster words that would give him stature in this man's tough game, even in Hackett's contemptuous eyes. He had never felt like this before, never been so swept on, so charged with steam. He slammed into it under bursting pressure—until a quiet voice spoke at his shoulder.

"Here goes my job, Giff," it said.

Gifford looked up at Timmy Russell. She was nipping at her lower lip and she was deathly pale.

"What?" Gifford mumbled. "Job? Your job? What about it?"

"I'm about to lose it."

"What? Why?"

"I'm going over and tell Hackett something, and Hackett's going to kick me out."

"What the hell, Timmy?" Gifford protested.

Timmy sat quietly in the chair beside Gifford's, her fingers entwined in her lap. She looked half her age, like a terribly disappointed child and yet she looked older and worn with weariness.

"I overheard what you told Hackett," she said. "I can't let you print it. It wouldn't be fair."

Giff laughed, then suddenly stopped. "Have you gone nuts?" he howled at her. "You can't let me? Why, you can't stop me! Timmy, what the hell is this, anyway?"

Timmy said, very quietly, "Barry wouldn't tell you where he was that night and he'll never tell anybody because he was with me."

It took Gifford a moment to realize

what she had said. He sat staring at her, his fingers poised over the keyboard, the color fading under the stubble on his cheeks; and suddenly he felt sick.

"Timmy," he said in an empty tone.

"Barry came to my apartment after he left the Hideaway," Timmy said. "He stayed until just before dawn. I'm sorry if this hurts you, but I've got to tell you because Barry never would."

Gifford peered blankly at the few words he had peppered onto the sheet of paper in his typewriter.

"It—it's been like that for some time now," Timmy went on. "You see, Barry's wife is so apt to make trouble—she's that kind—we've had to meet secretly. We're hoping the divorce will go through soon. Then Barry and I will be married."

Numbly, Gifford nodded.

Timmy said, "I know how much this means to you, really I do, but I can't let you print that stuff about Barry. It would get him in a jam unjustly; it would be terrible for both of us. And it wouldn't accomplish anything. It wouldn't help Carl Hackett because I can prove that Barry had absolutely no connection with the murder, and proving it would hurt us both. Don't you see?"

"I see," Gifford said leadenly.

"I'm sorry, Giff."

Smiling wryly, Gifford tore the sheet from his typewriter, crushed it into a wad, and flung it into the wastebasket.

"That's what you meant when you made that crack about the primrose path," he said.

"Yes. People are capable of doing such horrible things sometimes, I was scared." Timmy rose wearily. "I—I'll explain it to Hackett."

Gifford reached out and closed his hand hard on her arm. "No, you don't!" he said quickly. "I'm not that much of a heel—to make you do that. Take it easy, Timmy. Even if you did tell him, he'd only make you write the truth."

HE FORCED her to remain in her chair. Her eyes, lifted to his, were profoundly grateful. He smiled crookedly and glanced at Hackett. Hackett, at that moment, looked up at him.

"Get to work, Gifford!" Hackett snarled.

Gifford went to the desk with slow,

heavy steps. Suddenly he felt very tired and very old; and he thought he would like to crawl into bed and sleep forever.

"It's no go," he said quietly.

"What?"

"No go," Gifford repeated. "The theory about Barry Watson. It won't help Carl a particle. It'll only harm innocent people. There's no use—"

"I told you to write that story!"

"Not me," Gifford said soberly. "I've just found out where Barry Watson was at the time of the murder."

"Where was he?"

Gifford shook his head.

"Where was he?"

"I'm damned if I'll tell you that," Gifford said.

Hackett jerked to his feet. "If Barry Watson has an alibi, let him use it! Let him clear himself! But we're going to print that stuff just the same. Do you think I care who the hell I hurt? Do you think anybody matters to me when Carl's life is at stake? I told you we're going to clear him, no matter how, and I mean to do exactly that. Get back to your desk. Write that story!"

Again Gifford wagged his head. "Not me," he repeated.

"I'll write it myself!"

Gifford's eyes leveled. "If you do," he said, "you won't help Carl. What's more, I'll break your damned neck."

For a moment Hackett stood with his hands pressed hard on the desk, his mouth drawn to a tight line. Then his voice lashed.

"Gifford, you're fired!"

With a crooked smile Gifford said, "I guessed it. Okay. So long. It hasn't been nice, knowing you."

Chapter VI

HACKETT sat staring at Gifford as he went back to his desk. Timmy was still there, her eyes blue and limpid. She didn't speak while Gifford went through the motions of cleaning out his desk. The process consisted merely of dumping the contents of all the drawers into the wastebasket. When he finished, Timmy's eyes were still on him.

"What are you going to do, Giff?"

"I'm a crazy kind of a guy, Timmy," Gifford said. "This was more than just

a job to me. I wanted to make good under Hackett. He's mean as hell, and you can't help hating him, but he's the toughest city editor in the game, and making the grade under him proves that you've got the stuff. I don't blame him for firing me. In his place, I'd have done the same thing. I guess I haven't got what it takes."

"Giff, what are you going to do?"

"Catch up on my sleep, first," Gifford said. "Then maybe I can find a ditch somewhere that needs digging."

Timmy put her hands on his arms and made him look into her eyes. "You're so swell," she said softly. "You're too human to ever become the kind of reporter that Hackett expects you to be. I hate myself for having hurt you—in both ways."

Gifford managed a smile. "Thanks," he said. "So long. And good luck."

He walked out of the city room quietly, feeling a crazy desire to laugh. Job gone, girl gone—it was funny. It was so funny that Gifford kept making queer noises in his throat as he drove home. It was going to be good to get some sleep now. He wished to God he'd never wake up.

He walked heavily into his little apartment and began to tear off his clothes. He was almost stripped when he picked the alarm clock out of the corner where he had flung it. He chuckled at it sourly because it wasn't going to be pulling him out of bed any more for a while. Its crystal was smashed, and the hands were pointing to 4:02. Gifford was staring at it numbly when, suddenly, the telephone bell began clamoring. Wearily, Gifford took up the instrument. He heard a crisp, genial voice.

"Gifford? Owen Watson calling."

"Good morning, or afternoon, or whatever it is."

"I understand you're open for a new job, Gifford," Owen Watson said briskly.

Gifford knew what had happened. Timmy had called Barry Watson. Barry Watson had told his father, the publisher of the *Bulletin*. Gifford didn't know whether to be resentful or grateful; he was too busy trying to think.

"That's right," he said.

"There's a desk waiting for you over here if you'd like it," Owen Watson said. "We need a good man."

Gifford drew a breath. "Thanks, Mr. Watson. May I have a little time to think it over?"

"Certainly. Call me back when you've come to a decision. But I'd like to have you working for me."

"Thanks," Gifford said again dizzily. "You'll be hearing from me soon."

He put the telephone down, then began to get back into his clothes. The bed looked soft and inviting; turning away from it called for a real effort. But Gifford pulled into his coat, his face set and his eyes determined; and he put the alarm clock in his pocket. Then he left.

He knew he looked odd when he stepped into the city room of the *Chronicle*. His face was black with beard, and his clothes needed pressing; his eyes were veined with red and surrounded by dark lines; and the clock in his pocket made a big lump.

Knowing he had been fired, everyone paused in their work to stare at him—especially Timmy. He smiled at her, then walked to the corner where Hackett was slashing at a mess of copy.

Hackett glowered at him. "I thought I fired you."

"I've got a story, Hackett," Gifford said. "I could give it to the *Bulletin*, but I think it belongs in the *Chronicle*."

Hackett didn't move.

"You said you want Carl cleared," Gifford went on. "You want him cleared, no matter how—and you mean it?"

"Certainly I mean it."

GIFFORD nodded, his mouth drawn tight. He found a copy of yesterday's final on the desk, spread it out, and pointed to a column that Timmy had

written. Then he took the clock out of his pocket and put it on the desk.

"There's the evidence that will corroborate the murderer's confession," Gifford forced himself to say. "You see, the second ambulance arrived at the Fletcher home at 4:15. Until 4:15, only three people in the world knew that Fletcher had been killed—his wife, your son, and the murderer himself. You see, when you phoned me, I pulled this clock out of the wall and threw it into the corner and broke it—and the clock reads 4:02."

Gifford saw some of the wearing tension go out of Hackett's manner. Hackett looked at the copy he had been editing. Gifford saw the headline that was scrawled on it in blue: Grand Jury Indicts Carl Hackett for Fletcher Murder.

"Carl arrived home just as you were driving out, isn't that it?" Gifford inquired quietly. "He thought something must be wrong and he followed you. He must have stayed at the guest house after you left and found out what had happened. Of course, you didn't know about his part in it until he was arrested. He'd have gone to the chair before accusing you."

"I'd never have let him!"

"Of course not. I think I know why you phoned me just when you did. You thought there had been time for the ambulance to arrive—you didn't know about the collision—and you were anxious to have news of Louise Fletcher. That, and getting the story first."

"Write your angle on it, Gifford," Hackett said in an amazingly gentle tone. "I'll handle the rest."

Amid a strange quiet, Gifford went to

[Turn page]

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his desk. Timmy and all the others were watching him. Sitting at his typewriter, he saw Hackett sweep aside the edited copy and begin to write in long hand, swiftly.

Gifford put paper in the roller and began to hit the keys. As he wrote, he felt, strangely, that he was doing the best job of his life, a job that even Hackett would consider a good piece of news work. When he finished, he sat exhausted, watching as Hackett sent the roll of copy down the tube to the composing room.

Hackett was watering his roses when the proofs came up. He corrected them carefully, sent them back, then got into his hat and coat. There was no hardness in his face now. With almost a comradely gesture, he came to Gifford.

"I've put through a recommendation for you," he said. "I think you can expect to be the new city editor. Let's go."

As they drove toward headquarters wordlessly, Gifford remembered things: Timmy telling Hackett that Louise Fletcher had had a lover, and Hackett rasping, "Who is he? Did you get a description? Any clues pointing to that man's identity?" Hackett facing Carl and declaring, "You don't have to tell me

you didn't do it. I know you didn't." Then, "I don't give a damn what's necessary, we've got to clear Carl."

Knowing that his own confession would mean nothing, Hackett had bent over the dying woman he had loved and begged her to tell the truth. Gifford recalled, too, something he had said himself, something that now seemed full of grim truth: "But then, I don't suppose any man wants to go to the chair if he can possibly avoid it."

As Hackett got out of the roadster, he asked a thing that put a lasting lump in Gifford's throat.

"Take good care of my roses for me, will you, old man?"

Gifford was at Hackett's side, and Hackett was at the desk in headquarters, standing square-shouldered and straight, being formally booked for the crime when the extra hit the streets. The headlines screamed: Chronicle Editor Confesses Fletcher Murder—Clears Son.

It was the first time that Hackett had ever given Gifford a by-line. It was the last story that Hackett would ever handle. And together they had beaten the *Bulletin*.

Gifford shook the murderer's hand.

● ● ●



HERO—OR JERK?

Eddie was a high-school football hero who delighted in torture. One day he bought some mail-order pictures of scantily-clad girls who were bound and gagged, and it gave him the idea he'd like to try out the stunt himself—on one of his pretty classmates.

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by M. E. CHABER

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Joe had a special reason for his



Jones screamed, and rose straight up from his seat

SNAKE HOBBY

By BENTON BRADEN

JOE HEENEY was a big, plump man. He had rather small, heavily lidded eyes that gave people the impression he was half asleep all the time. But some of those who had had real estate deals with Joe had found out there was a very active brain beneath the drowsy expression.

Most of Joe Heeney's deals concerned farms, so he spent a great deal of his time driving. Filling station operators and hamburger stand operators all knew him well and they all liked him. Joe was affable and even jovial as a rule.

He was generous, too. He drove a nice car and he was always picking up hitchhikers and he frequently handed out dollar bills to the ones who looked honest and hungry. He was well aware of the hazards of picking up hitchhikers, but it was a rare day when he didn't give two or three of them a lift.

This day was no exception. He was out on the main highway that led north when he pulled over to the edge of the concrete and braked his sedan to a stop. The man who had been working his thumb overtime grinned and hurried to the car door as Joe opened it.

The hitchhiker was well-dressed in slacks and sports coat. From a distance he had appeared young, but Joe noticed

now that he was probably past thirty. He had a sharp face and black eyes that seemed a little shifty.

"Howdy, Bub," Joe said heartily. "Hop right in if you want a ride. My name is Heeney. Joe Heeney."

"Mine's Jones," the hitchhiker said as he got in and settled himself. "Thanks for the lift. I was getting a little hot standing there in the sun. I'm trying to make Chicago. About eight hundred miles to go, I guess."

"That's right," Joe said as he applied pressure to the accelerator and the gears shifted automatically. "You've got a long haul ahead of you. Sorry I can't take you far. I'm on my way home and it's only about twenty miles. I'm in the real estate business and I've been out looking at a farm a man wants me to sell for him. And I took a couple of hours off to work at my hobby."

"What's your hobby?" Jones asked.

"Snakes," Joe drawled. "I know it's kind of a funny hobby but I just happen to like to go out and catch snakes."

"I'll say it's a queer hobby," the hitchhiker frowned. "What do you do with 'em after you catch 'em?"

"I give some of the little harmless ones to kids," Joe said. "When I get a big, deadly one I cage him. But there aren't

many deadly ones in this country. I don't average one a month."

The hitchhiker didn't seem to be greatly interested in the subject of snakes. He seemed more interested in the car. He leaned over just a little and took a furtive look at the dial on the instrument board. First he noted that the gas indicator showed the tank was full. The mileage registered at a little over ten thousand. The car was just well broken in and running perfectly.

He frowned in irritation as he looked at the speed indicator. Joe Heeney was driving at exactly twenty miles an hour. There was nothing unusual about that. Joe was never in a hurry, and twenty was his normal speed, especially when he carried a passenger.

"Nice car you got here," Jones said.

"Never had a nicer one," Joe said. "Easy riding, and I've never had to touch the motor yet. Just had it lubricated and checked this morning, so I won't have to worry about it for another thousand miles."

Jones' black eyes gleamed in appreciation at that information. His mind was working fast. He figured he could use this car, and the big, sleepy-faced man didn't seem much of a problem. A new car, just greased, and with a tank full of gas would take them a long way without requiring a stop. It would be dark in about three hours. Plenty of places to ditch dead weight.

AGAIN his eyes went speculatively to the panel. He looked down and sneered a little as he saw that Joe was an extra cautious driver. He had his right foot ready on the brake pedal, and his left foot was poised on the clutch pedal. Jones didn't notice anything odd about that. It looked like a perfect setup to him. Also, a real estate man would be almost sure to have a few fair-sized bills in his wallet. Jones' right hand began to slide under the left side of his coat.

"I'll let you out at Centerville," Joe said. "You won't have much trouble hitching another ride there."

"No, I guess I wouldn't," Jones said, a hard smile twisting his lips. "But it ain't going to be necessary for me to hitch any more rides for a while, mister. Because I'm taking over right now. You feel that

thing in your ribs, sucker? If you've got any doubts about it, it's the business end of a gat. I guess you got brains enough to know what that means."

"You mean—you're holding me up?" Joe gasped.

"What else?" Jones snapped. "Now you drive nice and do as you're told and maybe you won't get hurt too bad. You try any tricks, and I'll blow a hole through you. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Yes," Joe gulped. "You want me to stop the car—and get out so you—"

"Nah!" Jones said in disgust. "It ain't going to be that easy. If I let you get out, you'd have the cops after me in a matter of minutes. This heap is full of gas, and you said you had it greased this morning. So we ought to be able to coast along all right till dark. Then I'll let you out. But I'll have to take some precautions to see that you don't get to the cops too quick. Now speed up! You're just crawling. Twenty miles an hour! I could get out and walk faster than this."

"I don't like to drive faster than twenty miles an hour," Joe objected mildly. "It's dangerous."

"Dangerous? What a laugh!" Jones snickered. "Don't you know it's safer to drive fifty on a highway like this? Somebody's liable to come around a curve fast from behind you and smack right into you."

"It's not other cars that worry me," Joe said. "It's snakes. They don't like to ride at high speeds. Makes 'em restless and mean. Now at twenty miles an hour they just relax and lie quiet."

"What the hell do I care about how snakes like it?" Jones snorted. "I want to get somewhere! You speed up, or I'll work on you. Put 'er up to fifty right now!"

"All right," Joe said. He hadn't turned his head once since the gun had been jabbed in his ribs, but had kept his eyes steadily on the road ahead. "But you can't say I didn't warn you. If that big rattler gets restless and crawls out and strikes you—it won't be my fault."

"What kind of a bluff are you trying to run on me!" Jones snarled. "You think I'd fall for a snake story? You speed up. I ain't afraid of no snakes."

"I'm not either—when I'm driving

twenty miles an hour," Joe said with a sigh. "I told you my hobby was collecting snakes and that I had put in a couple of hours at it this afternoon. I caught a mighty big rattler. If you'd look down, you'd see there's an opening under your seat. I put that rattler in a box and shoved him in there. Plumb forgot about it when I picked you up. Anyway he'd lie quiet in there as long as I didn't go over twenty. But snakes are very sensi-

under the seat in a box.

Jones' mouth opened, and his face lost a little color. If this guy were telling the truth, that snake might pop out any minute now and sink his fangs into Jones' leg. Because Heeney was following instructions and speeding up. He had the car up to forty now. A rattlesnake bite was something a guy couldn't afford to take a chance on. If he got bit, he'd have to get to a doctor quick and get some

SHE WAS HALF NEGRO, HALF WHITE!



Somewhere in the past, the blood
of two races had mingled and now
in a city jungle came—the payoff!

HOMICIDE in HARLEM

by DALE BOGARD

is only one of three sensation-packed novels in the Fall Issue of

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tive to speed. At fifty, he'll come wide awake and start crawling around to see what it's all about. He might strike the first thing he saw, which would probably be your leg."

"Nuts! That's just a line you're using on me to try to get me to duck my head down so you can get a chance at this gun," Jones said harshly.

But his eyes weren't as assured as his words. After all, this guy Heeney wasn't like anyone he had ever ridden with before. He hadn't even winced when the gun had been thrust in his ribs. He just drove and stared straight ahead as though he weren't much concerned about what might happen to him. A queer guy like that might be just crazy enough to have a rattlesnake in the car. He might even be nutty enough to have shoved it

serum or he might die. And it would be a painful death.

"Slow down!" Jones ordered suddenly, and his voice wasn't too steady. "Slow down quick!"

GLAD to," Joe said without a change of expression. "Because I know that big rattler is upset by this time. He's squirming around, trying to get out of that box right now. Maybe part out already. But maybe he'll settle down when we get back to twenty miles an hour—if he isn't out of the box already."

"I ain't falling for this snake yarn," Jones almost yelled. "But you pull over to the side of the road and stop, and I'm going to take a look. If you're lying, I'm going to knock you over the head right now and take my chances. There

ain't a car in sight. Pull off the road and stop."

"That's what I'm doing right now," Joe said agreeably. "There's a good level place right ahead. You can see if that rattler's got his head out. Maybe you better hold your feet up until we're sure—"

"Shut your yap and put on the brake!" Jones yelled, and there was fear in his voice now. "Stop her. Your brake!"

Joe raised his foot and pushed down hard.

At the same instant Jones screamed and seemed to rise straight up from his seat about two feet. The gun in his hand exploded, but the shot went through the top of the car. Jones dropped the gun as he came down. He screamed again and for the second time he seemed to rise in the air as though he had been catapulted. The tone of his scream showed that he was in both mental and physical agony. As he descended the second time two great hands seized his throat and put on pressure until his face started to purple.

During those brief seconds there was murder in Joe Heeney's eyes. "I ought to choke the life out of you right here, Jones!" he said in a voice heavy with emotion. "I've picked up hitchhiker's all my life. So did my wife. As long as she lived—until she finally picked up a rat like you. He killed her and hid her body in a clump of woods and drove on. He was never caught. So I still drive the highways and pick up hitchhikers. The difference is that I try to pick up possible criminals.

"I stopped at a filling station back there just before I picked you up. They told me that you had hung around there for a while, that they guessed you were a tough one and thought you had a gun on you. They gave me your description, so I picked you up. Yes, I'd enjoy choking the life out of you. It would be like avenging the death of my wife. But the law says I can't do it. So you'll just get twenty years like the three others I've caught in the past few months."

Joe sighed and turned his head as he sensed that another car had pulled up behind him.

He saw a uniformed state trooper coming on the run.

"I see you've got another rat, Mr. Heeney," the trooper called out. "He get at you? Are you hurt any?"

Joe Heeney slowly relaxed his grip and shook his head. "The only thing that hurts me is to have to let go of him," he replied.

Jones got his mouth open and gulped air.

"This guy is crazy, trooper!" he belated. "He's got a rattlesnake in the car, and it bit me. You got to get me to a doctor quick or I'll die!"

"Too bad it wasn't a rattler, scum!" the trooper said as he dragged Jones from the car. "But the only snake in his car was you. He's thoroughly prepared for your kind of reptile. Makes it his work to keep an eye out for criminal hikers. I'll bet you looked over his car carefully to see if it was in good shape and had plenty of gas. But you probably overlooked the fact that this car with its type of automatic transmission doesn't need a clutch pedal. You didn't notice that there was a clutch pedal there—or suspect it was a fake.

"That clutch pedal works a metal slat under the seat where you were sitting. There are four big needles set in that slat. They come up through the cushions when he presses down on the fake clutch pedal. No matter where you sit, two of the four needles are bound to hit flesh. I guess you did think a rattlesnake had hit you when you got two of those big needles stuck good and hard into the seat of your pants.

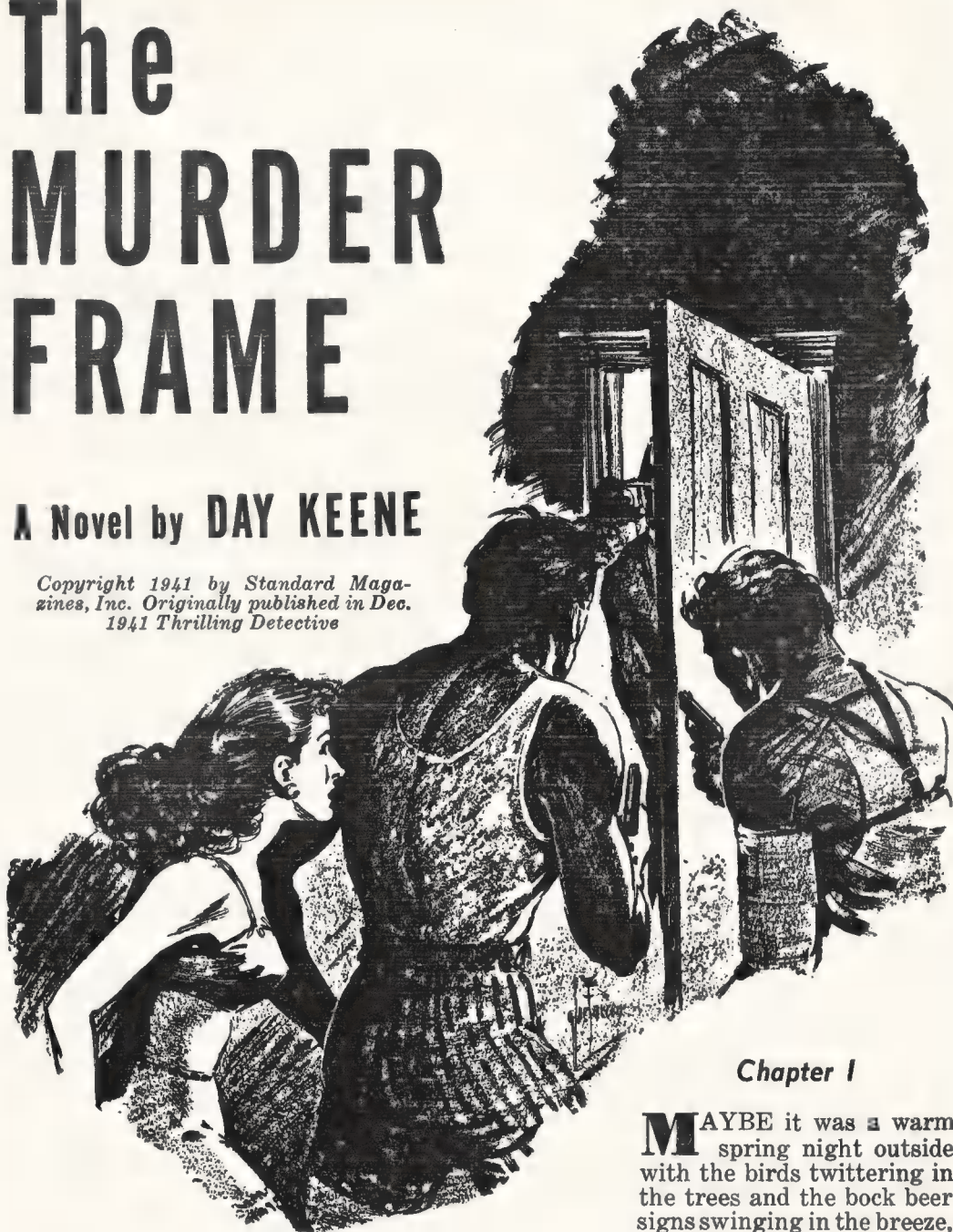
"You went up in the air and came down and hit 'em again. By that time you completely lost your head and were ready to believe anything. All the folks along the road know about Mr. Heeney and his snake trap. Only they never mention it when hitchhikers are around. They're always tipping him off to the suspicious looking ones. This is the fourth one you've got, Mr. Heeney, in eleven months."

"That's right," Joe Heeney said, nodding gravely. "But look at the scores of hitchhikers I've picked up. The percentage isn't as high as you might think. I've picked up some tough looking men who turned out to be fine fellows, down on their luck. But one vicious one like this makes them all look bad."

The MURDER FRAME

A Novel by DAY KEENE

Copyright 1941 by Standard Magazines, Inc. Originally published in Dec. 1941 Thrilling Detective



Chapter I

MAYBE it was a warm spring night outside with the birds twittering in the trees and the bock beer signs swinging in the breeze,

Gin, guns, and gals don't mix—but Matt would bet his trick left arm his pal hadn't killed that sexy thrush!

but you couldn't prove it by me. I felt terrible. There was only an inch of Scotch left in the bottle and no more room on the cuff at McGinty's.

I'd gone out on a long limb for Steve. I'd begged, borrowed, and hocked everything that I could for the last appeal—even my trick left arm. I looked like a bum. I hadn't shaved in three days. I hadn't paid my rent for so long I was afraid to leave my office for fear they'd lock me out. And I was hungry. I was so hungry that I was talking to myself in the dark.

"Yes, sir, for a steak that thick I'd commit murder myself."

A voice came from across my desk—a girl's voice.

"How thick?"

I jumped a Chinese mile. I hadn't heard anybody come in. I flipped on the desk light and spread my first finger two inches away from my thumb.

"That thick, sister." I scowled. "But what's it to you?"

She said, "Boo!" Then, "I might buy the steak."

She coolly curled up in a chair and sat looking at me.

I looked back. She was worth looking at. Not too big. Not too little. And young. She wasn't a bad-looking chickadee, at all, except perhaps she was a little too pale.

"With onions?" I bargained.

"And French fries," she agreed. "You are Matt Mercer, aren't you?"

"What's left of him," I pleaded guilty.

I leaned my good arm on the back of my chair so I could get at my gun if I had to. The wren was young and she was cute. But after all the broadcasting that I'd done concerning my intimate knowledge of the facts behind the murder of Sherry Fields, I couldn't afford to take chances. For all I knew she might be a she wolf in lamb's panties.

"You want from me, what, sister?" I said and scowled again.

"A killer," she told me frankly, then smiled. "But I believe you mentioned a steak."

I had. But I didn't dare leave the office. Unless I could give them something on account, I might not get back in.

The girl laid a fifty on my desk.

"Expenses," she said. "Let's eat in

Pete's. It's closest."

I picked up the half C and kissed it. "Pete's," I agreed, "it is. Just how will you have your killer, miss? Broiled plain or smothered with mushrooms?"

WHEN we had ordered the steak at Pete's and were eating, the wren leaned across the table.

"You," she told me accusingly, "are a former top sergeant of Marines."

That was no news to me. I kept on eating steak.

"You lost your left arm," she continued, "two years ago in a 'so sorry' incident on the Yangtse." She smiled. "But I imagine that you sent quite a few sons of Nippon out to find it."

I began to like the dame.

"You were supposed to die," she said. "But you were too tough to die. You were pensioned out of the Service. And when you were, your buddies, Steve Theo and Harry Young, bought their discharges and came with you. You three have always been together. For twenty years the three of you have been a credit to the Service and a scandal to the jaybirds."

I grinned at that one. It was true.

"In Chicago," the wren went on, "you got a private detective's license and opened Headaches, Incorporated. You guaranteed to cause headaches or to remove them. And up to four months ago you made a pile of money."

I didn't quite get her drift, but she was piping mess call. Sooner or later she would come to the point.

She did.

"Four months ago, the police found Steve Theo filled to the gills in the apartment of Sherry Fields, the singer. Sherry was dead, and Steve Theo's gun had killed her. But you didn't believe he did it. You've sold, begged, and hocked for every dime you could for legal talent. And the cost of the last appeal has put you away out on the well-known limb. Steve Theo burns tomorrow night. And as a last resort you've been broadcasting in all the hot spots that you know who the real killer is. Am I right?"

I nodded. "You're psychic, sister. And Steve didn't kill the thrush. He says so. But why tell me my story?"

"Because it ties into mine," she said.

"I'm Sherry's sister. My name is Sally Fields."

I gulped at that one.

"Yeah? Then how come I didn't see you at the trial?"

"I wasn't there." She shook her head. "I just flew in from the Canal Zone this morning. That's where I first saw you." She smiled. "You don't remember me. I was just another dancehall dame. But you and Steve and Harry got lit up one night and wrecked the bar where I was working. You *claimed* I'd been insulted."

I grinned sheepishly.

"Those were the days. So Sherry Fields was your sister. Well, what do you want from me?"

She reached across the table and laid her soft hand on mine. Her big blue eyes were blazing furiously.

"I want the man who killed Sherry!"

"Then you don't think that it was Steve?"

"No more than you do," she told me. She opened her purse and laid a flat sheaf of bills on the table, all of them fifties. "There's the rest of your retainer—and there's more where that came from."

I looked at the picture of Grant. I hadn't seen old Ulysses' beard in a month. I found myself liking the dame.

She sounded as if she was leveling. I had to be sure.

"You're certain you are Sherry's sister? You aren't just trying to buy me off?"

She smiled thinly.

"Off of what, Marine? And if you think that whoever killed Sherry will fall for your phony broadcast and come to you, you're wrong. Whoever he is, he's smart. That's proved by the way he framed Steve. All he has to do is wait. Steve Theo burns in twenty-four hours."

"You have some lead I've missed?" I asked.

She nodded. "I think I have. I want you to see Barton, Benton and Bowles, and ask to see Sherry's will. And I want you to locate Sherry's husband and—"

"As you were," I stopped her. A lot of wordage had come out at the trial to show that there had been plenty who were willing to gild the dead thrush's cage, but the husband gag was new. I said so.

SHE shrugged slightly. "It's possible that I'm the only one who knows that Sherry had a husband," said this girl who had declared she was Sally Fields. "The last I heard of him he was playing drums in some cheap band. His name is Joe Phillips, and he's a hop-head."

"You think he killed her?"

"That—" she smiled at me sweetly—"is what you're being retained to find out. And whether Barton, Benton and Bowles have filed Sherry's will for probate."

"If they're the executors of her estate, and your sister left a will, they've filed it," I told her. "There's nothing fishy about that firm. Young Bowles was the head of Steve's defense. And old man Barton wouldn't stoop to anything phony any more than he'd talk to a Democrat."

She began to gather up her purse and gloves.

"You're stopping where?" I asked her.

As she got up from the table, I thought she looked as if she'd been sick.

"Room Four-twenty-one at the Hotel Harris. Call me when you get a lead, or if you think I can help you."

I asked just one more question.

"About this will. Is it important? I've been under the illusion that Sherry Fields died broke."

"Sherry didn't die broke, Marine," she told me. "Not by two hundred thousand dollars. I have a copy of her will. And two hundred G chips will buy a lot of murder."

I felt better as I waited for my change. For the first time in weeks I had a hunch that maybe Steve wouldn't fry. I had two new leads to work on and both of them hotter than thermite, if Sally Fields was shooting square. But I had less than twenty-four hours to go if Steve's life was not to be forfeit.

Then more trouble began with a twenty-gun broadside.

"That's the man." The waiter was fingering me. "He's the one who gave me the fifty."

Two slim lads were beside him. One of them flipped back his coat lapel to show me his Federal shield. I knew them, but they didn't get me behind my growth of whiskers.

"Well"—I grinned—"old reunion week. You boys are looking for me?"

One of them got me then.

"Oh, it's you, Mercer." He softened up a bit. "Where did you pick up the queer? There have been pieces of it flooding the Loop for weeks."

"Now wait a minute," I stalled.

But I didn't know how to go on from there. Either Sally Fields was playing me for a sap or someone was playing her. And somehow I believed her. But the G boys would be thorough. And if the rest of the sheaf in my pocket was queer, the law would have Steve fried and planted before I got through explaining.

"You mean that the half C I gave the waiter was bad?" I asked incredulously.

"No." The other G lad grinned. "It's a darn nice piece of art work. But it wasn't engraved by Uncle Sam. You don't mind if we go through you. It's merely a formal gesture."

I did mind. As he stepped toward me, I cupped my hand under his chin and shoved. He went down in a crash of dishes, and I beat his partner to the draw. It was the wrong thing to do to Uncle Sam.

But I hadn't time for regrets. Those could come later.

"Drop the gun, son," I ordered.

The G lad looked surprised, but he did.

"Have you gone nuts, Mercer?" he demanded.

I kicked his gun into a corner.

"Perhaps. And perhaps I just haven't got time to explain. I'll drop into the office day after tomorrow and you can send me to Alcatraz."

I left then—fast. I wanted three things in a hurry—my trick left arm that I'd left with Uncle Irving, a chat with some member of Barton, Benton and Bowles, and a nice long talk with Sally. But I almost missed all three. By the time I had reached the door, the lad on the floor let loose with a .45.

"Hey, what's the shooting for?" asked the cabbie that I flagged down.

I slammed the cab door behind me and nuzzled my gun cosily in the nape of his neck.

"Don't ask, brother," I told him. "Believe it or not, I'm not her husband. I was just waiting for a taxi."

Chapter II

MY ARM came first. I had a hunch I might need it by morning.

I ditched the cab just north of the river and cut over past the warehouses on Clark Street. I got Irv away from his supper.

"Get the arm out of moth balls," I told him. "And I want to use your phone."

A nice guy, Irv. He didn't ask any questions.

"Things are popping," I told him, "or I've been flimflammed by a dame." I tossed him the sheaf of wheat. "Any whole kernels in there?"

When I dialed the Harris, they told me that Miss Fields had not come in. I left word that I had called and would call again.

"Nine bad, ten good," Irv said, sorting the pictures of Grant. "Who stuck you with the queer?"

I told him as I dialed Barton, Benton and Bowles. Irv was one guy I could trust. Steve and Harry and I had done a lot of business with him. I'll bet I've hocked my arm to Irv a dozen times.

The phone at the law firm rang for so long I'd almost given up. Then some young punk said, "Hello?"

"Matt Mercer calling. It's important that I get in touch immediately with Mr. Bowles."

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Bowles is in Springfield, Mr. Mercer," he told me, "and he won't be back until almost midnight. He's seeing the Governor concerning a stay of execution for Steve Theo."

That was all right with me. It was good to know that Bowles was still in there fighting.

"Any new evidence turn up?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Mercer. I'm afraid that there isn't much chance of a stay."

"We'll see," I told him. "But I've got to talk to someone in the firm. Who handles wills and things like that?"

He told me it was old man Barton. I asked where I could get in touch with him. He told me frankly that Mr. Barton never saw anyone after hours. But he thought he was at his club, the Corinth. I thanked him and hung up.

Irv laid down my arm on the desk.

"Who left a will?" he asked me.

"According to her sister Sally, Sherry Fields did." I dropped my last nickel in the slot and dialed the Corinth Club. "Two hundred government fish. And Sally says she has a copy of the will."

"Sherry left the two hundred thousand to whom?"

"That," I said sarcastically, "is what I'm trying to find out."

"Yeah?" He turned the sarcasm back on me. "Well, if the dame has a copy of the will, why didn't you ask her?"

I hadn't thought of that. But there are a lot of things I don't think of. We didn't start Headaches, Incorporated, on brains. We were just three hard-boiled leathernecks who had always got by on brawn.

When I got the Corinth, I asked to speak to Mr. J. P. Barton, and was told politely that I couldn't. Mr. Barton was just leaving for his home. Besides, his standing orders were that he was not to be disturbed.

I knew what that meant. The old stuffed shirt lived way out along the Lake Shore. And he wouldn't be back in his office for twelve hours. I hated to do it, but I did.

"Tell him"—I scorched the first lie I could think of—"that this is the executive secretary of the Bar Association speaking. And that it is to his own interests to see me before we institute disbarment proceedings."

There was a gasp at the other end. But it got results. In fact, it got me Barton.

"Who—who do you say this is?" he spluttered.

I told my lie again and said, "I believe that you had better see me, Mr. Barton."

He was so mad I could hear his boiled shirt crackle.

"What sort of evidence have you against me?" he snapped.

I piled it on. "Evidence that you have illegally and feloniously appropriated an estate under your administration and have conspired to murder the legal heirs."

I HELD the receiver away from my ear to let it crackle.

"You—you're mad! You—you come down here and tell me that to my face! You—"

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," I cut

him short. "Tell the doorman the name will be Jones—John Jones."

I cradled the phone and took off my coat and shirt to strap on my trick left arm.

"When Harry comes back from telling Steve good-by," Irv said, "if he should call here, I'll tell him you're—where?"

I slipped my shirt back on. "It might just be that he'll find me in a cell."

Right, that was. I'm plenty tough. But those soft-voiced, hard-eyed lads who work for Uncle Sam are tougher. And if the wren from Panama could not explain away the bad ones in that sheaf of wheat, Steve would be doing M. P. duty in the hot spot for all the help I could give him.

Before I pulled up in front of the Corinth, I stopped for a shave and a suit press, and two big double Scotches. I had both arms. I looked and felt a lot better. There was only one thing wrong with the picture. Somewhere I'd picked up a tail.

It was the usual black sedan with the curtains tightly drawn. And it was a death car. I could smell the cordite just itching to waft my way. It meant one of two things. Either my running off at the mouth was bearing fruit or it was tied up in some way with Sally. The hearse stopped when my cab did and parked half a block away.

I walked up the stone steps of the Corinth and a flunky in knee breeches and silk stockings stopped me at the door.

"Jones," I said. "John Jones is the name. Mr. Barton is expecting me."

The flunky's grammar didn't go with his breeches.

"Sez you," he said to me. "On your way, lug. Mr. Barton called the Bar Association, and they say you're a phony."

"So what?" I grinned and started inside.

He made his first mistake by swinging at my chin. I smacked him so hard he bounced. And then the fun began. He was one of the Moron quintuplets—there were four more just like him inside. We mixed it all over the lobby. Those boys hadn't been born in silk breeches. They'd come up from in back of the yards.

"Stop it! Stop this disgraceful brawling!"

The lugs seemed to know the voice.

They stopped, and those who could get up on their feet did. I stood there, dusting off my clothes and spitting blood into the cane and umbrella stand.

"A disgrace and an outrage," the elderly gent in full soup and fish came again. "Disgusting! Shameful! Shocking!"

He was looking right at me. I glared right back and demanded:

"And just who are you?"

He had snow-white hair, plump pink cheeks, and enough starched shirt front to make a sail for a captain's gig. And he was so mad his eyeballs were popping.

"I am James Patrick Barton," he spluttered. "You are the man who called me?"

I admitted that I was. The old sport puffed up like a poisoned hound.

"And just why did you make that phone call? What is it you want?"

For Steve's sake I crawled. I even apologized. I explained that I had always done my business with Bowles, but it being a matter of life or death for my partner, I thought he might answer three questions.

He cooled off a little, but his eyes were suspicious. I gave it to him fast, before he changed his mind.

"Did Sherry Fields leave a will disposing of two hundred thousand dollars?" I asked. "Is that will on file? And if there is a will, who does the money go to?"

He stopped to think it over.

"No, to your first question," he said then. "I am positive that the girl to whom you refer died destitute. Why do you ask such a question?"

H HE GOT an answer straight from the shoulder.

"And what's more," I wound up, "Sherry Fields' sister tells me that she has a copy of the will, with your firm named as its executor."

The old gentleman looked concerned and rather puzzled.

"You can produce this sister?" he asked.

I told him I could.

"Then I wish you would." He had unbent so far that he was almost friendly.

"An unfounded statement of the type she's made reflects upon the dignity and integrity of Barton, Benton and Bowles. Will you ask this girl to join us here and

bring her copy of this—er—alleged will?"

I had to admire the old gent. After I'd lied and slugged my way in to see him, he was certainly playing fair. But I felt plenty sore about Sally. If she had been conning me, for reasons of her own, if Sherry Fields hadn't left any money, then there was no reason for anyone to tag her to get it—and Steve's last out was gone.

I called the Hotel Harris and asked for Sally Fields. After a minute a man's voice said, "Hello?"

"Get off the line," I told him. "I'm calling Room Four-twenty-one."

"You've got it," he told me smoothly. "Go on. Just who is this calling?"

I gave my name, and the man on the other end of the wire said, "Oh." And I knew who he was when he said it. Only one man in Chicago could give it the same inflection.

"So it's you, Matt," he said. "The operator told us you'd called."

"Lieutenant Cartier?" I said.

"Of Homicide. You know this girl here, Matt?"

"I do. She's a client of mine."

"You don't say. And what is it you want?"

I got a little hard-boiled then.

I want to talk to Sally Fields," I growled.

"Okay," he agreed. "But you'll have to come to the hotel and bring a medium with you. Sally doesn't live here any more. She's dead. Someone just blew in the front of her head with a forty-five."

I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came out. All I could think of was Sally Fields and how she would look with her pretty face blown in.

"Something has happened to the girl?" Old Mr. Barton's voice was concerned.

I nodded and walked on out of the club. Lieutenant Cartier would be expecting me. We weren't close friends, but we were friendly. He had always batted on my side whenever a well-placed ball would help at Headquarters.

Sally Fields was dead. Nothing had ever hit me so hard before—not even the Nipponese "plum" that had blown off my arm at the shoulder. There had been something fresh and vital about the wren I had liked on sight. But, being me

I'd had to wait until she was dead to know it.

Chapter III

LOWER LASALLE Street is bright, but deserted at that time of night. The brokers all go home to count their day's profits.

There wasn't even a cab in sight. But it was only a short walk to the Hotel Harris. I walked along, puzzling about Sally. Why had she been killed? Who had killed her? Why had she come to me? Why had she lied about Sherry's



"—Hello, Sarg—I can't hear you, Sarg—Hello, hello—!"

will? And why had she cold-decked me with the sheaf of phony fifties?

I had so much to puzzle about that my head wasn't tied on to my shoulders. I had completely forgotten about the death car that had trailed me to the club. I didn't forget it for long.

I heard the tires on the pavement first. Then the purr of the motor. The car had circled the block while I had been inside the Cornith Club and it came up on me from behind. It was coming slow.

But the driver kept it in second so he could be gone fast when his business was over.

It almost stopped when it was beside me. A white face bloomed in the open

window while the snout of a tommy-gun poked out. That was a big mistake. The gunner expected me to run or throw myself flat on the pavement, and he wanted to be able to swing his gun. But I'd been dusted off by machine-guns before. I stepped in under the gun, my left arm forcing it upward while my right hand dealt out lead.

As one of my slugs ended that gunny's career, his gun gave one last spasmodic burst. Then the steel fingers of my trick left arm clamped down, and I yanked the gun right through the window of the car. The move left the white-faced gunner, no longer white-faced, half in and half out of the death car and bleeding all over the pavement.

That was enough for the driver. He fed gas to the big sedan so fast that it bucked like a supply sergeant's mule with a sand spur under its pack band. Then it roared off up the street.

I stood where I was to get in one last shot, using their own tommy-gun for luck. My first burst got the death car driver through his haircut. The big sedan stopped roaring up LaSalle Street and tried to climb the front of the First National Bank. You could have heard the crash for a mile.

I dropped the tommy-gun in the street and went away from there before the cops came. I had two appointments—one with the Feds, one with Lieutenant Cartier—and I didn't want a third with Central Bureau.

Besides, I'd recognized the white-faced lad I'd killed. He had been one of Spike Donovan's boys. And if Spike Donovan thought enough of me to try to rub me out, that meant he thought I knew something. Now all that I had to do was see Spike and find out what he thought I knew.

I laid my cards on the table with Cartier. We talked in the living room of Sally Fields' suite while the tech boys and the coroner worked on the body.

I didn't want to see her with her face blown in.

The only thing I held out on Cartier was about the slaughter down on LaSalle Street. I could tell him about that later. Right then it would have only complicated affairs. I wanted to work on Spike alone, with Steve to think of.

"And tonight was the first time you had ever seen her, Matt?" asked the Homicide lieutenant.

"That I remember," I told him. "But she said she remembered me from the Zone." I tossed what was left of the queer on the table. "She gave me twenty fifties as a retainer. Ten of them were good. Ten of them were bad. They were stacked like a Dagwood sandwich."

Cartier began to laugh. "So that's the story, Matt? I suppose you know that you're wanted by the Feds?"

"I do," I admitted. "And after tomorrow night they can have me. But until Steve fries or gets a stay, I'm playing hard to get."

He was a nice lad, Cartier. He had come up the hard way and he ranked a whole lot higher than his official standing. He could have been commissioner twice but turned it down because he wouldn't play ball with the polities.

"Perhaps I can fix it, Matt," he said, and I knew that his word that I would show up would satisfy the Feds.

HE GOT back to the subject of Sally. "And you say that old man Barton denies that Sherry Fields left a will?"

"He does. And he was willing to meet Sally at the club and look at her alleged copy of the will."

"We didn't find it," Cartier sighed. "The dame was bullying you, Matt. But blamed if I get the picture."

He pawed through the wren's effects that were heaped up on a table. There was nothing that looked like a will.

I picked up a Pan-American stub that read, "Balboa to Chicago." She hadn't lied about that. Cartier said he had checked with the airport and that she had come in on the morning plane. I picked up another slip of paper, slightly yellowed. It was the Valparaiso marriage license of one Joseph Phillips and one Sally Fields. And she had told me that Phillips had been her sister's husband!

"I'm putting a 'Wanted' out on Phillips," Cartier said as I dropped the license back on the pile. "You haven't checked on him yet, have you, Matt?"

"No." I looked at the bedroom door. "You don't think he killed her?"

Cartier shrugged.

"Someone did. Must have been waiting in the room here. The floor clerk says that Sally came upstairs alone."

The bedroom door opened, and Captain Mattox came out. He has never liked me much. But he's no aid to my digestion, so we're even on that score. He had a book in his hand and he gloated when he saw me.

"Oh, Headaches, Incorporated, in person, eh? You're just the man I want to see. Let's see you cure this headache."

I was not in a spot to pick a fight. Each tick of the clock was building up the current for Steve. I wanted to get away as soon as I possibly could and work on Spike Donovan.

"Now look, Captain Mattox," I said. "My only connection with this case is that the dead girl came to me as a client. I thought she was leveling. And if she wasn't, I can't be blamed for that."

"You never saw her before tonight?" he asked.

"No. Not that I remember."

"You don't say, Mercer," Mattox said.

He handed the book to Cartier. It seemed to be a scrapbook of some kind. There was blood on one corner of the cover.

"Then tell me this, Lothario," he said, and I didn't like his tone. "Why should the deceased have kept a scrapbook of everything that you've done for years?"

Lieutenant Cartier glanced roughly through the book, then looked at me. He wasn't pleased.

"Where did you find this, Mattox?"

"Under her pillow."

I took the book and rifled through the pages, and there wasn't a thing in the book but me! My saddle-tanned Boris Karloff stuck out on every page.

Me winning the trophy for high score at the International Pistol Shoot at Shanghai—me standing behind some sandbags after that little trouble that we had had in the Native City, with Harry and Steve grinning behind me, and a caption, "Old-time Marine Dares Jap to Fight"—me on the deck of the gunboat on the Yangtse with a .45 in my right hand and no left arm. She even had a clipping from the Chicago *Daily Times* of when me and Steve and Harry opened Headaches, Incorporated. I handed the

book back to Cartier.

"Go ahead, Mercer. Explain it." Mattox was having a swell time.

"I can't." I told him the truth. "I'm not a mental genius like you are. But this whole business smells to Denmark, and I'm being pushed around and stalled until Steve's safely fried and the case closed. There's someone got some chestnuts in the fire they don't want out."

Mattox took a pair of nippers from his pocket.

CARTIER didn't interfere, for technically Mattox was high man.

"Come on now, Mercer," Mattox said. "Give. How do we know you weren't waiting up here and when the Fields dame came in you had a lovers' quarrel and killed her?"

I shook my head.

"You don't. But it just so happens that I've got an alibi."

Mattox pounced on that one. He knew my usual alibis.

"Yeah? You were in what barroom—where? And what pot-bellied barkeep have you bribed to say you were there?"

"None. About the time that Sally Fields was killed, according to Lieutenant Cartier, I was at the Corinth Club, talking to J. P. Barton. You know, of Barton, Benton and Bowles."

Lieutenant Cartier grinned behind his hand. The old guard from the Union League, the Hamilton Club, and the Corinth pull plenty of weight in Chicago.

"Okay." Mattox was plenty disappointed as he put his cuffs away. "But God help you if you're lying, Mercer!"

Sergeant Ferris of Homicide called to Mattox just then, and from the expression on Ferris' face, there was only one thing he could be reporting—the black sedan that was embracing the First National Bank with two of Spike Donovan's boys dead in it.

"I wasn't lying, Lieutenant." I tried to square myself with Cartier. "To the best of my knowledge, I never saw Sally Fields before tonight." For some reason I was trembling. "But—I can see her before I go? If I can go?"

"You can go," he assured me. "We aren't charging you with anything yet. You've always shot square with me, Matt. And I've always played ball with

you. I knew you're out to save Steve if you can. That's your affair. But if I catch you throwing your weight where it doesn't belong, I'll jug you. Fair enough?"

I told him it was, and we went into the bedroom together. The girl lay on the bed fully dressed, with her face to the wall.

"You're through?" Cartier asked Dr. Kurt.

"All through." The coroner dried his hands on a towel. "We'll do a post, of course, but she was killed by a soft-nosed forty-five. One of your boys found the slug in the wall. It went in at the nape of her neck and tore out her face."

A guy never gets used to death. It's so final somehow. No writ of habeas corpus can spring you once you're tagged.

I tiptoed around the bed. Then held onto myself hard. The girl on the bed was dead. But she wasn't Sally Fields. Or if she was, she was not the wren from Panama who had walked into my office!

Chapter IV

I CALLED my office from a phone booth in the hotel lobby. Harry Young, the third of our long-time trio, was back. He is bigger, more bull-headed, and dumber than I am. But I was glad to hear his voice. I asked him how Steve was.

"Alive," he said. "But he won't be by this time tomorrow night. They're going to burn him. Anything new turn up yet, Matt?"

I told him everything that had happened, even about the wren on the bed upstairs. He suggested that we see Bowles before we saw Donovan. He and Bowles had come back on the train together, and Bowles had said that he wanted to see me and would be in his office until midnight. If anything was to be done, we would have to do it fast. The Governor wouldn't listen to a stay.

"But about the dead wren, Matt?" Harry asked me. "Shouldn't you have ought to have told Lieutenant Cartier that she isn't Sally Fields?"

I admitted that I should have. I don't know why I didn't. I guess it was the scrapbook. I wanted to see Sally Fields myself and ask her just how come. And

the wren from Panama was my client, even if she had retained me with a steak and a stack of queer. And if she had tagged the dame who was stretched out on her bed, it was ten to one that Mattox would try to tie me in, alibi or no alibi, as an accessory.

"In Bowles' office in ten minutes," I signed off.

I bought a pocketful of panatelas and walked out on Randolph Street, thinking. Had the wren on the bed upstairs been killed because someone thought she was Sally? Or was she Sally? If so, who was the wren who had retained me? Was she one of Spike Donovan's girls, and all of it part of a plant to put me out of the way? What was it that Donovan thought I knew?

My mind went back over the Sherry Fields killing. Steve had fallen for the dead thrush, all right, and had spent a lot of time with her. They had been drinking together the night she had died. And his gun had killed her. But he'd had no reason to kill her. He had liked her, and she had liked Steve. It being Steve's gun that had killed her hadn't meant a thing—except to the jury.

Steve claimed he hadn't even heard the shots and didn't know a thing about the killing. That was reasonable. He had been mixing gin and bourbon on top of being dead-tired after a case we'd just wrapped up, and he admitted he'd passed out early.

What had happened after that was anybody's guess. Sherry's servants had left at nine, and being there alone, except for Steve, she could have opened the door to anybody. Even the junkie drummer that Sally, if she was Sally, had lied to me about. But was there such a guy? And if there was, why had she palmed him off as her sister's husband when he belonged to her?

I shook my head. I felt like the Quiz Kids' program, the only difference between us being that they know all the answers.

It was almost ten o'clock, and Randolph Street was crowded. There was a long queue in front of the Oriental, buying tickets for the midnight show. Yet I walked right into trouble again when I felt a gun persuading me through the guy's pocket.

I knew what it was before he gave me the office and glanced over at the curb. A Caddy sedan, mostly chrome, was pausing, and I got a glimpse of the lad in back—not a bad-looking lad, at all. All mobsters are supposed to be low-brow, guys who had to burn the school down to get out of fourth grade. But not Spike Donovan. He had been graduated from Yale and looked like a good-natured Humphrey Bogart. But he wasn't good-natured now.

The son who was nuzzling me with the gun said, "Over to the car, Mercer. Double time. Spike doesn't like you any more."

I was surprised that as hep a lad as Donovan had thought I might obey easy. Huh! I've been shot up so many times and sewed up to hold Scotch again that I'm hard to scare. Besides, I don't like gun-hiking invitations to a ride.

I eased back just a trifle and let my left arm hang.

My right hand was in my pocket on my gun.

"Pistachios to you, brother," I said. "And suppose I don't come easy?"

"That's up to you." He wasn't tough about it. He might have been asking me to have a drink. It was just a job of work he had to do. He poked a little harder with his gun. "Get moving, Mercer."

I MOVED a short step forward and slightly to his right. And as I did, I rammed one of the magnetized steel fingers of my trick left arm into the barrel of his .45. He lost his head and pulled the trigger. His gun exploded in his belly and turned his natty gray rust-red. And all that it got me was a twisted metal finger that any blacksmith could pound out.

Spike Donovan's car moved on just as the first dame screamed, "Help! Police! Murder!"

It wasn't murder. It was suicide. But I didn't stop to correct her. I kept on going as the crowd began to form around the body.

The office of Barton, Benton and Bowles was in the middle of the block. I was in the foyer of the building before the first siren began to wail. Harry was waiting for me.

"You done that," he accused me.

"I done it," I admitted. "It seems that Spike Donovan wants to see me—bad."

Harry is big, and blond, and sullen. He looks like a Saint Bernard who's been crossed in love.

The only time he ever smiles is when someone is trying to pat his ugly features with a spade. But he grinned now.

"Oh, boy!" he said. "Let's go talk to Spike as soon as we've finished with Bowles."

You'd have thought he'd been asked to the White House.

Harvard was Bowles' first name. And that's where he'd studied law. He was thin-lipped, and dark, and cold-blooded on account of one of his early ancestors getting mixed up with some Indian dame. Once his family owned half of Chicago. But he wasn't stuffed shirt, at all. The only reason they let him into Barton, Benton and Bowles was because his dad had willed him his place in the firm.

He was rated ace-high as a mouth-piece by all the hoods in Chicago. That's why we had jumped at the chance to get him when he offered to head Steve's defense. He had cost us plenty, but he had done everything that we'd paid for and a lot that we couldn't.

He was sitting at his desk when we came in. His eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep and showed the strain he had been under.

"It's no dice, Matt," he said right off. "Steve burns tomorrow night. I've pulled every trick I know. The Governor says a stay is out, unless we can dig up some new evidence."

"Would this be evidence?" I asked him and told him everything I had told Harry over the phone, also the last grab that Spike had tried to make in front of the Oriental.

"And J. P. told you that there was no such will?" he asked.

"That's what he said. Why? Is there?"

Bowles shook his head. "That, I couldn't tell you. Wills and administering estates aren't in my line. But if there is such a will, it might save Steve. And Donovan isn't gunning for you for fun. Someone is paying him plenty, unless he had an iron of his own in the fire."

He seemed to be trying to make some decision, and made it. He got out of his

chair and scowled.

"Come on," he said and led us into J. P. Barton's office.

We three were alone in the place. Bowles knelt at Barton's safe and began to fiddle with the dial.

"This is burglary," he admitted. "But I've been curious about a good many things that have happened in this office for some time. It isn't known as yet to the general public, but my esteemed and elderly colleague is nine-tenths and a fraction broke."

I got what he meant and whistled. Harry just looked dumb, as usual. He wasn't interested in anything but action.

Bowles opened the door of the safe and took out a leather-backed file marked:

Personal and Confidential

"If there is such a will," he said, "and it hasn't been filed for probate, it ought to be in here."

HE CARRIED the file to Barton's desk and sorted through it. It was the last paper in the file. It was in a blue cardboard binder and the inscription on the first page read:

Last Will and Testament of Sherry Fields

We sat on the desk while he skimmed through it.

"Then the wren in my office wasn't lying!" I exclaimed.

"No." Bowles shook his head. "According to this rather remarkable document, Sherry Fields' financial affairs have been managed by my partner for some time. And she left, or thought she left, two hundred thousand dollars. She willed it in equal shares to her sister, Sally Fields, and her husband, Joseph Phillips."

"Why wasn't that will filed for probate, and why did Mr. Barton deny that there was a will?" I asked Bowles.

"That is what I'd like to know."

He looked at the will again. Scrawled on the margin in pencil, opposite the name of Phillips, was a notation:

Tried to Locate

"Yes," Bowles continued, "why wasn't this filed for probate? Or, at least, why

didn't the old gentleman tell me about it? I could have got a locked jury, if nothing else, if I'd had this at Steve's trial."

He picked up the phone on Barton's desk and called the Corinth. Barton had gone.

Harry came right to the point.

"But if the Fields dame left two hundred grand, where is it?"

Bowles pursed his lips for a minute and went through the will again. It wasn't pleasant for him. After all, he was Barton's partner.

"Okay—I started this," he admitted. "But let's not jump to conclusions. They won't hold in a court of law. And they won't earn Steve a stay. There must be some explanation. After all, J. P. isn't exactly the type of man who would go around murdering and conspiring against anybody's heirs because he had—er—mismanaged their alleged estates."

I thought of my lie over Irv's phone and wondered. I had accused J. P. Barton of just that thing to get in to see him.

And it could have been that he wasn't mad, but scared!

On a hunch, I picked up the phone and called the Musicians' Union. When somebody answered, I asked:

"What is the present address of a trap-drummer you have on your books by the name of Joseph Phillips?"

"Two-seventeen East Ontario," somebody's voice told me two minutes later. That was how easy it was to find him. "But if you're thinking of hiring him, the union won't guarantee Phillips. He's a top skin-banger, but it says on his card that he kicks the gong around."

I thanked him and hung up. If Barton had tried to find Phillips, he hadn't tried any too hard.

Chapter V

HARRY eased himself off the desk and started for the door. I stopped him.

"Easy there, Marine. Just where do you think you're going?"

He looked surprised.

"Why, out to his place in Highland Park and beat the truth out of Barton."

"No." Bowles shook his head. "You can't handle men as important as J. P.

Barton that way, Harry. Besides, this is all surmise on our part. You leave Barton to me." He tapped the file on the desk. "I want to go through this thoroughly before I act. Then I'll drive out and see him."

He looked at his watch. It was twelve.

"Suppose you boys meet me outside his home at two o'clock," he suggested. "If his affairs are in the state I'm afraid they're in, I'll want a witness to our conversation."

"Okay," I agreed. "And meanwhile—"

"Check up on Phillips. Find out where he was on the night that Sherry died." Bowles grinned at me. "And if you have the nerve, I'd suggest that you call on Spike. Find out who's paying him to rub you out, how he slipped the girl the queer fifties, and why. And ask him what he's done with the real Sally Fields."

I thought of the scrapbook that Sally had made of me.

"You think she was leveling with me then?" I asked.

Bowles nodded. He had the reputation of being a playboy when he was in the cash, but he wasn't playing now. His thin, high-cheek-boned face was worried, and his black eyes were hard and cold. If he had been wearing feathers instead of his hundred-and-twenty-five-dollar tweeds he might have been one of his own ancestors starting on the war-path.

"Yes, I do," he told me. "And I think whoever killed Sherry Fields tried to kill her sister Sally tonight, and that the other girl found in her bed was a case of mistaken identity."

He had been thumbing through Barton's office check book as he talked. He handed it to me.

"Puzzle this out if you can," he said.

I couldn't. The last check stub was for two thousand dollars. And it was made out to Sally Fields.

Harry and I didn't talk much in the cab on our way to Spike's place. We were both thinking of Steve. There weren't many hours to go. It was up to me and Harry and Harvard Bowles. No one else cared if he burned.

Barton was tied up in it some way. But that wasn't much hope. Even if the old stuffed shirt confessed he had gone west with Sherry's two hundred Gs and had

conspired to defraud her heirs, it wouldn't prove that he had killed her. It wouldn't even earn Steve a stay. Spike Donovan was our baby. He *had* to talk!

Yet there still was something wrong with the picture, something I felt I should see and didn't. I told Harry so.

"Nuts," he grunted. "Barton's broke, see? Sherry comes to him and has him draw up a will for the two hundred thousand smackers that he's handling for her. Then the old gent gloms onto the money and hires Spike to knock her off. But he doesn't know that the wren from Panama has a copy of the will. She blows in and demands her dough. He stalls her with a check, figuring to have Spike bump her next. But she outsmarts him. She comes to you first, see?"

I didn't.

"If Barton intended to deny there's a will," I said, "why should he have given her a check? That was an admission on his part that she had a claim. He could have said that copy she has is a fake. And why was half of the money that she gave me bad? Where did she get it? Where is she now? Who is the dame who was knocked off in her room? And why, after six months of sitting tight, should Spike Donovan pop out of his box and have two goes for my life? Who is in back of all this?"

Harry shied away, as he always does, when the sum is more than three times three.

"Okay, okay. Who do you think I am? The M. C. of Information Please?"

I've soldiered with him for twenty years, but I swear that guy is a moron.

A GOOD general never spills blood on his own terrain if he can help it. He always does his fighting in the other guy's front yard. And Spike was a damned good general. That's why I figured it was the best move to crash into his night-club. Hoods don't like to kill in public. It's bad for the balance sheet—scares the suckers away.

The place was crowded. The first floor show had just gone on. Spike was sitting by himself at a table near the dance floor. Harry and I brushed past his bodyguards and lobbygows and sat down at his table.

Spike wasn't surprised or startled. He

almost seemed to expect us. He just glanced once at his bodyguards to see if they were there.

I got right down to business. My left hand was on the table. My right was out of sight. It was holding a gun on Spike's belly.

"Enough is sometimes too much, Spike," I told him. "You've had two whacks at my life tonight. I'm here to even, unless you tell me why."

Donovan sipped at his drink before he spoke.

"And if I don't?"

"I'll blast."

He laughed at that and signaled for the waiter.

"You're flying off the deep end, Matt," he said. "I've nothing personal against you boys. And I won't hold this against you. I know how you feel. It's a rotten shame Steve has to burn."

"There was something you wanted, Mr. Donovan?" the waiter asked.

"Two more glasses," Spike told him. "And Scotch for my friends. My private stock. And you'd better bring an unopened bottle so they'll know they aren't being poisoned." He paused for a second, then asked the waiter, "There—er—has been no trace as yet of the girl?"

The waiter told him there hadn't been and shuffled off.

"What girl?" Harry demanded.

"Our torch singer didn't show up tonight," Spike said, nodding toward the mostly undraped wrens cavorting around the floor.

I brought him back to business.

"Begin to talk, Spike! Who hired you to blast me?"

He looked at his bodyguards again. They were sitting at a table just in back of Harry now.

"You realize, of course," Spike said, "that all I have to do is raise a finger, and my boys will blow you right out of your chairs."

"If that's the way you want it," I said, "raise your finger. You and me and Steve and Harry ought to have some good times where we'll all be."

Perspiration stood out on Spike's forehead. He knew I meant what I said. His boys could blast me and Harry, but all the blasting they could do wouldn't stuff his insides back in again.

He looked once more at his bodyguards, then back at me. He seemed relieved. He was even smiling as he said, "You win, Matt. No man can stand out against that argument. Just what is it you want to know?"

"Who hired you to rub me out?"

He grinned.

"Believe it or not, it was a girl, Matt. A red-headed wren from Panama by the name of Sally Fields."

Harry said, "Oh, oh!"

I shook my head. "Don't give me that stuff, Spike," I told him. "I want the truth or I'm on the kill. Who hired you to rub me out?"

"But I've told you, Matt." He seemed surprised that I should doubt him. "You don't think I'd lie to you, do you, after the argument you just gave me?"

The waiter came back with the Scotch and two glasses. But I had never been less thirsty in my life.

"Why should this Sally Fields hire you to rub out Matt?" Harry asked, as he uncorked the Scotch.

SPIKE smiled as he turned to me.

"When you couldn't get a lead as to who did kill Sherry, if Steve Theo didn't, what did you do? You broadcast in every hot spot in town that you knew who the killer was. Naturally, if Steve was innocent, that meant you were stepping on someone's toes. As it transpires, those little tootsies were those of Sally Fields."

"I don't believe it."

"No? She claims that she just got in from Panama. Perhaps she did. But she was in town the night her sister was murdered. Check me on that if you want to."

Spike poured a drink from the fresh bottle of Scotch into his own glass and sipped it before he said, "Here's how I get the picture. Sally hated Sherry because Sherry stole her husband. She married him, too. Sally had been under age when she married him, and there was an annulment. But neither one lived with him long. He's a good-looking guy, they say, and a top musician, but he spends most of his time in dreamland. Anyway, Sherry stole him away from Sally. To make amends, she cut Sally into her will. That's when Sally saw a

chance to kill two birds with one stone—and she did."

It was a plausible argument, but I didn't believe a word of it. I told Spike so in no uncertain language. He shrugged.

"That's up to you," he said. "I don't claim to know the facts. I'm just giving it to you the way I get the picture." He paused a moment, then went on. "Perhaps Sally has been in the Canal Zone ever since that night. She only came back to town when she thought it was safe, that Steve was nailed in the chair. And she wanted the money that Barton was holding for her under the terms of Sherry's will."

I told him that Barton had denied there was a will. I didn't tell him that Bowles had found the will.

Spike grinned as he sipped at his drink.

"Of course Barton denies the will. Why wouldn't he? Probably the old goat and the wren are in it together. Wise up, Matt. If they can keep that will out of probate, they can cut out Sherry's hop-head husband entirely and keep the whole two hundred grand."

"Then where do you fit in?" I asked him. "And why did Sally come to me with her song and dance?"

He smiled that superior smile of his. He had a right to feel superior. He'd made crime pay—and how!

"You understand, Matt"—he laid his hand on my game arm—"I wouldn't testify to this in court, but Sally didn't think that murder would be necessary. She thought she could have you put out of the way on a Federal rap by handing you a sheaf of the bum fifties that have been flooding the Loop for weeks."

"And then?"

"When you walked out on the G boys and got old Barton on the phone, the two of them were desperate. So they got in touch with me. You know what happened then."

"And the girl in Sally's room at the hotel?" Harry asked, and Spike Donovan raised his eyebrows.

"Who?" he asked. "And what happened to her?"

"Skip it," I said.

I had started to ask about the affair in front of the Oriental when one of Donovan's lugs came in from the street

and hurried over to our table. He looked worried.

"We can't find the dame anywhere, Chief," he blurted.

Spike glowered at him. "I've told you never to interrupt me when I have company at my table."

The lug went away, muttering. I was thinking. Spike's version of how everything had happened made sense and it didn't. For one thing, it was too pat.

"And where is Sally now?" I asked him.

"That"—he looked me in the eyes—"is one thing I wouldn't know."

Chapter VI

WE SAT there for a minute, no one speaking. Spike had said all he intended to say. There was nothing more that I could do or say to change his mind. You could wear out a pistol butt on a man like Spike Donovan, and he would still tell you just what he wanted you to know. Besides, once he got to thinking, he would know I didn't dare blast him. Not for Harry's sake or mine, but for Steve's.

I dropped a napkin over my gun hand and got up from the table. Spike pointed at the bottle.

"Take the whisky with you, boys," he said cheerfully. "Let's call it a peace offering."

Harry took it by the neck with one hand. His other was in his pocket. We walked to the door together on the left oblique. It seemed like miles, but it was only fifty feet. I expected to hear a gun crack down at any minute and feel a bullet in my back. I knew Donovan's kind of peace offering. A dame named Borgia used to serve them to the *crème de la crème* of Rome.

But no one tried to stop us. And there were no lugs outside.

Our next stop was to see Joseph Phillips, the dead thrush's husband. But if we didn't strike richer pay-dirt than we had at Donovan's, it looked like Steve was going to fry.

Inside the club, a dame began to sing as we climbed into a taxicab. It brought something to my mind, but I couldn't pin it down. I was so mad I was shaking, and there were too many things I didn't

understand. One was why Spike had ever let himself become involved in such a small affair. Two hundred thousand chips would be a fortune for guys like me. But it's only peanuts to the Donovans of crime.

Harry summed up my feelings in a nutshell.

"You know, I don't like the way that we were treated, Matt," he said. "That big, good-looking slob in there made me feel just like a rookie."

I got it then. For a guy who had just had two cracks at my life, Spike Donovan *had* been too nice to us. I felt like a kid who'd just been patted on the head and told to run along and play because there was something going on that I was too young to understand.

Someone had told Spike to lay off us. But why? Who was he really fronting for?

The East Ontario Street address the Musicians' Union had given us as that of Joseph Phillips turned out to be an old brownstone front that had been converted into rabbit warrens of one-and two-room apartments. There was no card on any of the mail-boxes that read, "Phillips."

We walked up one flight, and I banged on the first convenient door. It was opened by a bleached blonde in a housecoat. She had a whisky breath that almost knocked me down.

"Why, hello," she said, as if we were her long-lost brothers.

I tipped my hat politely and told her that I was sorry but we weren't on a social call. I merely wondered if she could tell us in which apartment Mr. Joseph Phillips lived.

She tried to close the door, but my foot was in the way.

"Get your foot out of the door, wise guy," she said. "If you're looking for the hophead on the third floor back, I don't know anything about him."

Harry handed her the bottle of Scotch. She brightened up ninety degrees.

"For me?"

"For you," Harry told her. "Loosen up. What's the number of Joseph's apartment?"

"Three L," she told him. "And I think he's in. I saw him go upstairs about

four hours ago with a little red-headed dame." She looked at us suspiciously. "You guys the Law?"

"No," Harry assured her. "We're just friends of Joseph's." He started up the stairs. "We just dropped in to beat the daylight out of him."

She watched us to the turn in the stairway.

"You shouldn't have said that," I told Harry, but I couldn't blame him for the way he felt.

"I am going to beat the daylight out of someone," he said. "Soon, too." He looked at his watch. "Steve burns in less than twenty hours, and all we get is conversation." He turned to me suspiciously. "This Sally Fields is red-headed?"

I HAD to admit she was. Then Harry told me what I was trying not to think.

"Hey, Marine! Maybe Spike Donovan wasn't bulling us. Maybe she did kill her sister."

I didn't say a thing. I couldn't.

Three L was at the end of a long, narrow hall that smelled of gas-plate cooking and a lot of other things. The hall carpet was musty and littered with papers and trash. It looked as if it hadn't been policed for a month.

I banged hard on the door. No one answered, so I banged again. It was originally the kitchen door of a railroad flat, and the top of the door was glass with a drawn window shade on the inside. And Phillips was in. We could see his key on the inside of the lock. Besides, the lights were on.

"Phillips!" I called. "Phillips!"

"Aw, bust it in," Harry suggested.

I did. All I had to do was poke the steel fist of my trick arm through the glass, then reach in and turn the key.

The room we barged into was a kitchen. There was a bathroom off it to the right. Another door led into a darkened room that could be either a living room or bedroom, and probably was both.

A third door in the rear wall led out onto a porch that faced the brick back of a warehouse.

"Cozy, eh?" Harry asked.

The place was a mess. Dishes were stacked in the sink. The remains of a

meal were on the table. Dead bottles were all over the floor. And over all was the smell of the poppy, and the incense that Phillips had used in a futile effort to mask it.

I opened the bedroom door and saw a cheap opium outfit on a stool. A man was lying on the bed with a blanket pulled up to his chin.

I flicked on the light. It was a ceiling bulb and dim. The man on the bed didn't stir. If he was Phillips, he was older than I had pictured him. But he was the type some women seem to go for—tall and thin and artistic-looking, with a mop of long gray-black hair that hung down over his eyes.

"So," Harry said, "that's the cause of murder." He walked over to the bed and shook the guy. "Come on. Snap out of dreamland, Joe."

Harry straightened up suddenly. He had a funny look in his eyes. He told me to feel the junky's skin. I did. It was cold and clammy. The guy was dead.

I tried to lift his arm, using my custom-made fingers to avoid leaving fingerprints on the body. Rigor mortis had begun to set in. The guy had been dead for three or four hours, or since about the time the blonde downstairs had seen Phillips come upstairs with Sally, or so she had told us.

Harry peeled the blanket back. There was a kitchen knife in the dead man's chest. I warned Harry not to touch it. Then I saw something white on the floor and picked it up. It was one of the white gloves that Sally had been wearing in my office, or its twin. I remembered the smear of rouge on the back of the cuff where she had touched her lips in her nervousness when she had told me about Sherry's will.

Harry dropped the blanket back as he had found it and sat down. I could see that he was wishing he hadn't given our bottle of whisky to the dame downstairs. I was wishing the same thing.

"Well, there goes Steve," Harry summed it up. "If the dame did the killings, we'll never prove it—not in time. Humph! Every time we turn around, there's a new angle to this case. And old man Barton can't be guilty of 'em all. We should have stayed in the Service, Matt. Headaches, Incorporated. We're

a pair of headaches as detectives."

"So you admit it?" It was Mattox who spoke from the doorway.

I knew as soon as I saw him that it was a booby trap. Cartier had told me he was putting out a "Wanted" on Phillips. They must have found the body hours before. Harry and I weren't guilty of a thing. But being found where we'd been found wasn't going to improve our standing.

MATTOX spied the glove in my hand. "Oh, destroying evidence, eh?" he gloated and took the cuffs he had been itching to use at the Harris out of his pocket. "Let's you and I go down to the Central Bureau, Mercer. There are several little matters we'd like to talk to you about."

I had to make my decision fast. And the hall was filled with Mattox's men. To make a break would mean having to shoot our way out through a crowd of lads who were only trying to make an honest living.

"You want just me, Captain Mattox," I bargained, "or do you want us both?"

He was honest enough in his way and he hadn't a thing on Harry. He shook his head.

"No, we don't want Young," he said. "He gets a pass."

Harry didn't want one, but I whispered to him:

"Scram. You keep that appointment, you know where, at two. And remember, it's Steve's last chance."

"I'll remember, Matt," he said to me, but he was looking at Mattox when he said it. And while Mattox didn't know it, he had just made a definite appointment to have his face pushed in.

"I'm wanted, for what?" I asked Mattox as the men in the hallway parted to let Harry through.

He grinned his cat-and-canary grin.

"Plenty. You may have been a big-shot hero in the Marines, Mercer. But you're not in China, or Nicaragua, or the Philippines. You're in Chicago. And we don't like tough guys."

"I'm wanted for what?" I repeated.

He told me. It was plenty. There was the matter of my not having told them at the Hotel Harris that the dead girl on

the bed wasn't Sally. That meant a possible charge as an accessory before the fact of murder. Then there was the affair of the black sedan. Two dead and unarmed men were in the car. All five of the flunkies at the Corinth, on top of swearing out personal warrants of battery and assault with intent to maim against me, were willing to testify that they had seen me mow down both men in the death car with a machine-gun that I had picked right out of the air.

There was another dead man on Randolph Street. There was Phillips on the bed. Could I prove that I hadn't killed him? His wife had been so in love with me that she had kept a scrapbook of everything I had done, said Mattox.

"And if that's not enough," he jeered, "the Federal boys are just itching to get their hands on you. You've two raps there. Resisting a Federal officer and counterfeiting."

I didn't say a thing. I didn't dare to. I was afraid I'd explode. It seemed that I had had a busy evening.

Chapter VII

THE police didn't take me to Central Bureau. They took me to the East Chicago Avenue station first. It's more private at that time of night.

Mattox did stay within the law. He let me call my lawyer from a wall phone in the squad room. Bowles wasn't in. I hadn't expected that he would be. He should be on his way to Barton's home.

If he and Harry could crack Barton, the whole thing might come out in the wash. If it didn't, both Steve and I were sunk.

Mattox had sent most of his men away, but he called in Lieutenant Cartier and the desk sergeant from that district.

"Why not talk without your lawyer, Mercer?" Mattox said.

I shook my head. I know my limitations.

"No, thank you," I said. "If it's all right with you, I'll just sit tight until Bowles can do my talking."

The worst of it was that I wanted to talk and didn't dare. I wanted to tell them what Donovan had told me. But I

knew he would deny it.

"It's not all right with me," Mattox said as he walked across the room.

His fists were doubled into balls. Cartier stood by, but he couldn't even see me. He felt I'd let him down. Mattox started a pass for my chin.

"Talk! Talk, you fool! Talk!"

As Harry would have said, he shouldn't have ought to have done it. I lifted my trick arm and took the blow on the steel. Mattox nearly broke his knuckles. He stood blowing on his hand and glowering.

"All right, tough guy," he said. "I'll step upstairs and get permission from the captain to clear all the drunks out of the tank. We can really go to work on you down there." He turned in the squad room doorway and looked at the desk sergeant. "Call up my office, will you, Mike? Tell them to change those assault and battery warrants sworn out by the boys at the Corinth to 'Assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill.' That arm of his is deadly."

He didn't know the half of it. Cartier spoke to me for the first time.

"You didn't play fair with me, Matt," he said reproachfully. "And unless you do, I can't do one thing for you. You're in a bad spot. Why not come clean and tell us the whole story?"

I told him that I already had, except about Spike's crack at my life, and that the girl on the bed wasn't Sally. And I was pretty sore about it all. Donovan had had two tries for my life. The wren from Panama had jobbed me on the fifties. Yet both of them went clear while I was locked up for murder.

"We're still looking for the dame," he said. "And you still insist that you never saw her before she walked into your office?"

I told him that I did. He wanted to know how I explained away the scrapbook. I had to admit that I couldn't.

"Oh-h," he said, and I didn't like the way he said it.

Then the door to the squad room opened, and Harry Young walked in. He looked bigger and dumber and more like a Saint Bernard than usual. I groaned. Steve's last chance, and probably mine, was gone. Bowles had told us he would need a witness to his talk with Barton.

"You want what, Harry?" Cartier asked him.

Harry grinned. And I knew that when Harry Young grinned like that, almost anything could happen.

"This," he told Cartier.

He started a haymaker from the floor and laid it on Cartier's chin. The lieutenant folded up like a blanket.

"I had kinda hoped I'd meet Mattox," Harry said. He leveled a gun at the sergeant who had opened his mouth to below. "You do," Harry told him, "and I'll put a bullet through your tonsils."

The desk sergeant shut his mouth.

"You're crazy, Harry," I said. "We can't get away with this."

He took two long steps forward and tapped the desk sergeant with the butt of his gun. Then he grinned again.

"Why not? We're doing swell so far. Come on. I've got a car waiting out front."

HE OPENED the door of the squad room and looked out. A harness bull with a pinch was waiting at the sergeant's desk. Harry put his gun in his pocket and walked out. I shut the squad room door and followed him. The officer at the desk thought we were plainclothesmen from another district.

"You fellows seen the desk sergeant around anywhere?" he asked us.

"He ought to be around 'most any minute, pal," Harry told him, but kept on walking.

We walked out of the door and climbed into the car. Harry had left the motor running. It was a good thing he had.

A police positive cut loose from the station door and lead ricocheted, screaming off of metal.

"Stop them!" screamed Mattox. "Stop those men!"

Harry fed gas fast to the car. But not quite fast enough. The harness bull had run out into the street and he was a better shot than Mattox. A slug crashed through our rear window, almost took off my left ear, and plowed on out through the windshield.

Harry kept on going and kept on grinning.

"Think nothing of it, Matt," he said. "So they shoot the car full of holes, so

what? This ain't our car. I stole it."

I clung to a car handle as he skidded north on the outer drive and kicked the crate up to ninety.

A siren had begun to wail behind us.

"Now you've done it, you moron!" I told him. "Why didn't you meet Bowles? Why did you have to spring me."

He drove with one hand while he fumbled a sheet of paper from his pocket.

"Okay," he said, "so I'm a moron. But I thought you should ought to see this. I went back to the office to get a spare clip for my gun and I finds this laying on the desk."

I flipped on the dome light of the car. It was a note from Sally. I read it fast:

Dear Matt:

Have waited here for you for hours. If you haven't tried to spend the fifties, don't. They're bad. Cashed the check that Mr. Barton gave me this morning at Spike Donovan's club, as he advised. In terrible trouble. Please, Matt, help me! Went to see Joe about Sherry's will—he was killed when I went out on the porch for air. Big crowd on my hotel room floor. Bellboy who didn't know me told me that I was dead. It must be Mary Linder, old friend who met me. Can't wait for you any longer. I'm afraid. Am taking a cab and driving out to Highland Park to talk to Mr. Barton.

It came to me then in a flash. I'd been dumb not to see it before. The pieces all fitted together like the parts of a jigsaw puzzle. We'd been slickered by an expert. It wasn't Harry who was the moron. It was me. If he hadn't sprung me, we'd have had another murder on our hands. Perhaps we did have now. Sally might just as well have written in that last line of her note:

I am driving out to die.

Barton's place stood on the edge of the lake, on top of a high bluff. There was a high stone wall all around it. Two of Spike Donovan's boys were loafing by the gate. We saw them in our headlights as we passed.

In the long trip up the lake shore from Chicago, our stolen car had grown a tail of suburban motorcycle cops. And our tail wasn't far behind us. Harry ran the car into a clump of woods two blocks from the gate, and we ran back.

I took one of Spike's lads while Harry took the other. They never even knew

what hit them. We tossed them in the shrubbery and went in.

The window drapes were drawn, but there were lights behind them. Harry wanted to go in the hard way, through the door. But I was thinking of Sally. I had to know that she was safe, or dead, before I started shooting.

I pulled up the sleeve of my coat and got a jimmy and a flashlight out of the forearm compartment of my phony. I've one in the upper arm, too. They're as good as a pair of pockets; better. Nobody would even guess they were there.

THERE was no moon. I pried open a basement window, stepped in—and landed in a coal pile. The hard nut slid out from under my feet and cascaded to the floor. You could have heard my landing for a mile.

"It must have been mice," Harry sniggered as he crawled in behind me.

As we stood in the blackness someone banged an upstairs door and feet thudded down a stairs. I threw my flash around. We were in the furnace room. I took one side of the door, and Harry took the other.

The basement lights flicked on. The furnace door swung open, and one of Donovan's lads stepped into the room with a .45 in his hand.

"Who's in here?" he yelled.

I stepped out behind him and slipped my good arm around his neck before he could even bleat. Harry took his gun.

"If you don't want to die, talk straight, son," I told him. "Where have you got the girl,"

I eased up the pressure so he could talk.

"The girl—"

That was all I got clearly. Two could play at the game we were playing. In fact, four did. I hadn't heard the other lads. One minute we had the best hand. The next, they'd shuffled us into the discard. I don't know what they used on Harry. But a furnace shaker makes a handy weapon. That's what they used on me.

Far away a voice was saying, as the floor came up to meet me, "So the tough papa bird wants to see the wren. Okay. Throw them in with her until the big shot gets here. We'll soak their feet in

concrete and dump them all in the lake together."

Then everything went blank just as it did on the Yangtse that night I lost my arm. . . .

When I woke up, I could see that the room I was in was large and well-furnished. But we were too many on a bed. There were three of us—Harry, and me, and Sally. And we'd been stripped to our B.V.D.s. Only Sally's were of sheer silk. And she was conscious.

I was never so embarrassed in my life. My modesty was covered only by my shorts, the straps that held my arm on, some wire around my wrists and ankles.

Sally's eyes were wide with fear.

"Easy makes it, Sally," I told her. "The Marines have landed and have the situation well in hand. Are we alone up here?"

She couldn't talk because she was gagged. She nodded.

Chapter VIII

ROLLING over on my side, I went to work. I pulled a wire cutter out of the compartment in my arm with my teeth. After that it was smooth sailing. It took me less than four minutes to make good the lie I had told Sally.

"The cops have been here?" I asked her when I removed her gag.

"No," she said. "But I've heard a lot of motorcycles going by."

"Look, Sally," I said. "Let's have your version of this affair before Harry and I go to town. We're going the hard way this time."

"You mean, from the beginning?" she asked.

I told her that a tabloid version would suffice. The main thing that I wanted to know was who had told her to come to me.

"No one told me to go to you," she said rather sharply. "I went because I was suspicious of Mr. Barton. He was nice to me this morning, but evasive. He gave me a check for two thousand dollars and said that Donovan would cash it, but that it was all that I had coming under the terms of Sherry's will. He said she had left all her money to Joe. I don't believe Mr. Barton knew Sherry had

mailed me a copy of her will."

"And out of all the private detectives in Chicago, you came to me? Just why?"

She looked hurt.

"You—you don't remember me, do you, Matt?"

I told her I didn't, but that while she was on the subject, she might as well explain the scrapbook that had landed me into all my trouble with Mattox.

Her eyes filled with tears. She said:

"I thought you were fooling when you acted as if you didn't know me. Well, forget it."

Harry looked at her real hard.

"Hey, Matt!" he burst out. "Sure, you know the wren. Only she was a blonde then. Don't you remember the night in Panama when a singer was insulted, and we wrecked the bar, and then you and me and Steve took three of the girls and a lot of bottles out to the old ruins? Sure, you do. You were going to quit the Service and make a billion dollars raising bananas in Yucatan so you could buy the Panama Canal for the chickadee."

I did remember then.

"So you remembered, and I didn't," I said.

"It looks that way, Marine," she said. "But skip it."

Honest, I never felt lower in my life. But the next minute I heard Spike's voice downstairs.

"Well, don't take all night about it," he was saying. "Get them set in concrete. Don't worry about the cops. They don't dare search the place without a warrant."

I asked Sally one more question.

"You went to the office of Barton, Benton and Bowles this morning—early? You and Barton were alone in his office?"

"How did you know?" she said. "I went there as soon as I got off the plane. Mary, the girl who must have been killed in my room, met me and told me that you were broadcasting in all of the hot spots that you knew who killed Sherry."

"I do," I told her. "But I didn't then. I had to learn it through trouble and woe."

I opened the upper compartment in my arm. It's a beauty. It holds two short-barreled .25s snugly and leaves room for two tear gas grenades. I gave

Harry one of the guns.

"I'm worried as hell about Bowles, Matt," he said. "Do you think they've rubbed him out?"

I didn't have time to tell him what I thought. Spike and some of his boys were coming up the stairs. And I'm allergic to concrete foot tubs.

The key turned in the lock.

Outside, Spike asked, "You frisked them both?"

"We stripped all three to remove any possible chance of identification if their bodies should wash ashore," answered a voice I didn't know. "All we left Mercer was his shorts and his cork arm. We'd better sink it with him. If it was found, the cops might trace it."

"They won't get a chance to," Donovan said, and opened the door.

THERE were four of them. Spike's eyes went wide at sight of the .25s in our hands. His boys went for their guns.

A .25 don't tear a big hole. But like that lad in Romeo and Juliet who'd been stuck with a sword told his friends, "It's sufficient."

"Corpses just seem to follow us around," Harry complained, but he was grinning.

"Spike!" Sally gasped. "It was Spike Donovan who was in back of it all. It was Spike who killed my sister!"

"No," I told her, "he was just a stooge. The firm of Barton, Benton and Bowles have been behind this all."

We stepped over the bodies and went downstairs to look for our clothes. Someone was pounding on the outer door, but I didn't open it yet. I was still one corpse shy.

We found it in Barton's den—the corpse of the stuffed shirt of the Corinth, with a blue bullet-hole through his temple. A gun was clutched in one hand and a paper in the other. I took the paper and skimmed it through.

It was a confession, all right. The old gent admitted pilfering the estate under the administration of Barton, Benton and Bowles and had squandered the money until there was nothing left. But he made no mention of his having killed Sherry Fields. And that was what I was looking for.

The knocking on the door grew more

insistent. "I'm not quite ready for the cops," I told Harry. "But if that's them, let them in."

But it wasn't the Law. It was Bowles. He came in white-faced, and shaking, and scared.

"For God's sake, what's been going on around here?" he gasped. "I drove up just in time to hear shots. I—"

He stopped short as he saw Sally. I apologized drily.

"Pardon me, Sally. I don't believe that you've had the pleasure of meeting the brilliant junior partner of Barton, Benton and Bowles. Miss Fields, Mr. Harvard Bowles."

She screamed. I had expected she would.

"But that's not Mr. Bowles!" she cried. "That's Mr. Barton!"

Even Harry got it then.

"Why you liver-lipped, white-bellied—" he snarled. "You posed as Barton when Sally Fields came to see Barton about—"

"That's enough," Bowles stopped him.

He had a long-barreled .38 in his hand. And from the way he was holding it, he knew how to use it. He smiled at me, thin-lipped.

"So you finally figured it out, did you, Matt?" Then he boasted, "Sure, I killed Sherry. And I had Joe Phillips killed. I not only looted the firm, but Spike and I were going to loot the town." He nodded at the den. "That honest old fool in there had been sitting on millions in potential blackmail for years. But he was growing suspicious of me, so I let him confess to my misdeeds." He glanced at the bodies at the head of the staircase. "Spike is dead?"

"Yeah, he's dead," Harry told him in a savage voice.

Bowles' thin smile widened. "Good," he said. "Then I'll collect all the gravy myself."

I could hear the roar of the motorcycle squad coming back, and the deep wail of a riot car siren. One of the boys had found our car in the clump of trees. I waved my hand at the assorted bodies.

"And you intend to explain all this, just how?" I asked Bowles.

He laughed out loud.

"There's nothing for me to explain," he said. "Perhaps you and Spike and

Harry shot it out. You see, I—"

Harry guessed what he was up to and tried to flick a shot at him with his .25. It clicked instead of barking. I didn't even pull the trigger on my gun. I knew that it was empty. Instead, I pushed Sally into the room with dead Mr. Barton, and ducked as the first slug from Bowles' gun whizzed by my head. Harry caught the second and went down and out for the count.

My turn came up again. Bowles took better aim this time. The siren of the police car had stopped out in front of the gate, and he was on his last down, with three to go. He had to kill Sally. He had to kill Harry. And most of all, he had to kill me.

I TOOK his third slug through my ribs. I could feel it burning in and coming out. I started for him, a little shaky on my pins.

"You tried to tuck me away with the bum fifties you had Spike slip Sally, didn't you, Harv?" I said. "You'd heard her speak about me and suspected that she might come to me."

"Die, damn you!" he shouted, and fired again.

I copped that one in the shoulder. It slowed me up, but I didn't let it stop me. I had Steve and Sally to think of.

"And when I walked away from the Federal boys," I told him, "you had Spike try to gun me out—just like his boys killed Sally's friend, thinking she was Sally. And when that didn't work, you told Spike to lay off me. By that time I was a good witness for you against Barton. I could testify that you'd found a will in his private files—and the old man didn't even know it was in his office. You mishandled Sherry Fields' two hundred thousand dollars! And it was you who killed her!"

I was only five feet away and limping on one screw. But he leveled the gun across his wrist before he fired. He didn't miss, but he would have done better free-hand.

I took the fifth slug through my arm—my steel and cork one.

"You'd never earn a sharpshooter's pay in the Marines," I told him. "But you're going to get full credit when you burn in the chair they've dusted off for Steve Theo. Credit for having the nerve to come to me and Harry and offer to head Steve's defense so you could cover your own back-trail by letting a right guy die!"

Feet were running on the gravel walk outside now. Bowles' face was a desperate white mask. He still had three to go and hadn't made first down. He let fly his sixth and last shot right at my middle.

And that was where it landed. But by that time I had both of my hands around his neck.

If I couldn't take him, I could hold him until someone else could take him—to the chair.

All the time Bowles was beating at my teeth with his pistol butt and screaming wildly:

"Die! Die, damn you! Die!"

"No," they say I told him soberly, "I'm too tough to die."

Maybe that was why I didn't. But I remember Sally holding me in her arms and kissing me, her tears hot on my face, just before all of the lights went out entirely.

Imagine! The wren had loved me all those years I hadn't even known she was alive.

But I know it now.

And here's a laugh. Captain Mattox, with his face pushed in by Harry, has told me that if I ever do anything about it he wants to be my best man. ● ● ●

FREE GUN BOOK

Through the courtesy of O. F. Mossberg & Sons, Inc., sporting firearms manufacturers, we are able to offer our readers, free of charge, the 46-page illustrated book, "The Guidebook to Rifle Marksmanship," prepared by the Nat'l. Rifle Ass'n. Please address your request to O. F. Mossberg & Sons, Inc., Dept. A, New Haven 5, Conn.

THE REAL BLUEBEARD

A True Story

By HAROLD HELFER

NOWADAYS, when it comes to light that somebody has killed more than one wife he's immediately referred to as a Bluebeard. Which shows how little anybody really knows about the original Bluebeard.

In the first place, the real Bluebeard was an esthetic individual, a patron of the arts who was greatly attached to music and the drama. He was also one of his country's great heroes. In the second place, Bluebeard had only one wife—and he never killed her!

The true facts about the first Bluebeard came to light recently from official records at the Chateau de Tour Neure in Nantes, France.

His name was Gille de Montmorency de Lavel, and he was the Baron of Rais.

The young baron actually had a blue beard. At least, it seemed to be tinged with blue. Born in 1404, he was, at the time of his inheritance, regarded as the richest man in France. He had palaces in Nantes and Angers and a castle in Tiffauges. Extremely generous, he was known as a benefactor of the poor.

His ruling passion was his love of music and art, and he sponsored costly plays and pageants.

It was his love of the arts that brought about his downfall. His extravagances were such that he began to find himself pinched for cash. Desperately, he enlisted the aid of alchemists, hoping they might be able to turn base metals into gold and save him. They rooked him, brought him close to a state of complete destitution.

Growing more desperate he executed one of the most fanatical documents of all time. With blood drawn from his own veins, he wrote that he would murder five little children and give their hearts to Satan in exchange for unlimited wealth.

Unable to bring himself to give up his luxurious life, the young baron was



trying to sell his soul to the Devil!

The baron was arrested on a charge that today would be regarded only as a minor offense. He had threatened a man. But since the man was a church official, this was considered sacrilege, and sacrilege was a capital crime in those days. The baron was sentenced to death.

It was then that the young bearded baron—he was 36—made a confession that stamps him as one of the most heinous individuals in the annals of crime. In his fanatical determination to recoup his fortune by winning favor with Satan, this esthetic gentleman, this lover of fine music, confessed to *MURDERING 120 CHILDREN ANNUALLY FOR A PERIOD OF SEVEN YEARS!*

The baron's execution was a thorough one. He was brought out on a platform on the gallows and underneath him a large pile of dry faggots were placed. At the moment the stool was kicked from under him and he commenced dangling at the end of the rope, a torch was set to the faggots. A tremendous fire shot upward, burned the rope, and plunged the bearded nobleman's body into the leaping flames.

The people wanted to make sure he was dead, plenty dead.

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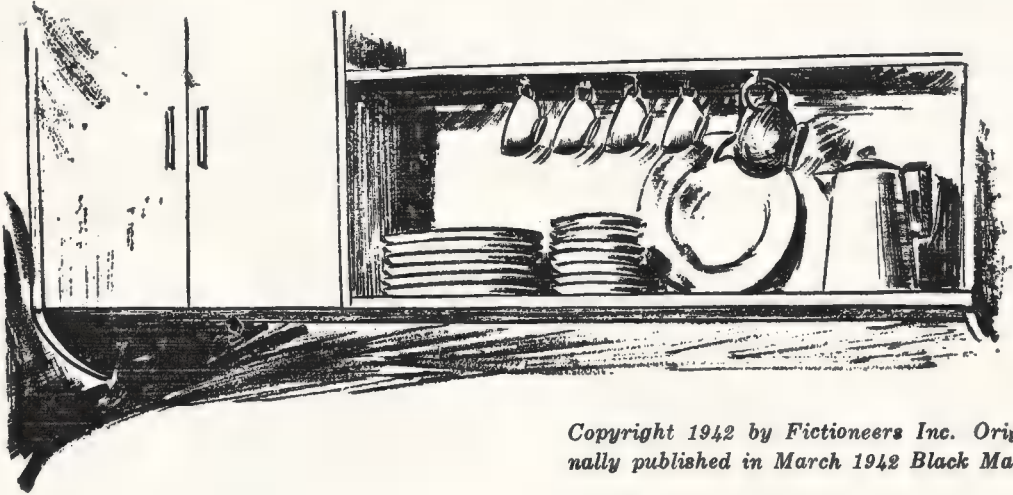
KINDLY

Klavak whistled. "You
killed her, Vanya!"



OMIT FLOWERS

A Novel by STEWART STERLING



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What kind of a degenerate gets a bride through a newspaper ad, and waits for her with an axe—on their wedding night?

Chapter I

LIEUTENANT TECCARD rocked back in his swivel chair. His fingers gripped the shiny oak arm-pieces tightly. It was an instinctive movement to get as far away as possible from the thing on his desk. Ordinarily, his office in the Headquarters Building seemed large enough. Now, suddenly, it was oppressively small and close. He kept his eyes away from the long, glass tray on the desk top, as he reached for the phone. "Okay for Sergeant Dixon."

The woman who came in wouldn't have been noticed in the average Manhattan lunch-hour crowd. She was pretty, but she hadn't worked hard at it. A man might not have paid particular attention to her as he passed her on the street, unless he happened to meet her glance. Her eyes were gray and curiously calm—as if they had seen a lot they hadn't found amusing.

She wrinkled up her nose. "My God, Jerry! A man can live without food for

three weeks, and without water for three days. But you can't last three minutes without air."

Jerry Teccard shoved his brown felt back off a harassed forehead. "Light a cigarette if it gets you, Helen." He indicated the roll of checkered oilcloth resting in the photographic tray. "You don't have to turn yourself inside out, gandering at this. You can take the medical examiner's word for it."

Acting Detective-sergeant Helen Dixon, second grade, regarded him grimly.

"After that year I put in at the Forty-seventh Street station, it'll take something to turn my stomach," she declared.

He lifted one corner of the oilcloth cylinder. "What's left of a woman's thigh. After the wharf rats worked on it a while."

Her lips compressed a little, but none of the color left her face.

"Where'd it come in?"

"Twenty-third Precinct. East Hundred and Fourth." He consulted a report sheet. "James Boyle, probationer, found a child trying to salvage the oilcloth that had been tied around it with some string. Boyle's beat takes him along the Harlem docks, foot of Ninety-eighth. This thing was on the tide flat at the side of the Ninety-eighth Street pier."

"When was this, Jerry?"

"This A.M. Quarter past ten. Doc says it's been lying there, or under the head of the pier, more'n a week. Some pupae of flies in the end of the bone. Eggs must've been laid seven, eight days ago, anyway."

HELEN DIXON bent over the tray. She didn't peer at the discolored bone, but her finger pointed to brown shreds of fiber which clung to the outside of the oilcloth.

"You said it was tied with string?"

Teccard pointed to a soggy tangle of frazzled gray in one corner of the tray. "Was. Doesn't mean a thing, though. Million yards of that stuff used every day."

"But these look like rope strands to me."

He squinted at them. "I noticed that. I'm going to send 'em up to the lab, for a microscopic. But the reason I sent for you—"

"You figure this might be one of the Happiness cases?" She moved past his chair to the window, opened it from the bottom a few inches, stood staring down into Centre Street.

"There's better than an even chance. That's why I asked the Policewomen's Bureau to send you up here. I know you've been plugging like hell on that assignment. If Crim Id can help, maybe you and I can work together on it. Like old times, when you were playing Big Sister to the floozies we picked up on Sixth Avenue." He swung around toward her. "My office wouldn't want any credit."

She touched his shoulder lightly for an instant, spoke without turning around.

"Damn the credit! If I could only break the case. I've been running around in circles for three weeks, hoping it's just another flock of old maids forgetting about friends and families because wedding bells are still ringing in their ears. But if this—" she inclined her head toward the tray—"is one of them it means the nastiest kind of murder."

Teccard nodded. "Never knew a suicide to cut off her leg. It's obvious."

"Any special reason to think she was one of this Happiness matrimonial agency's customers?"

He lifted his chin, ran a finger around under his collar uncomfortably. "Remember what you said that day we had lunch at the Savarin? About the kind of heels who have to find their females through an ad? Especially when they pick on dames who've had the lousy luck to be disfigured or crippled?"

Her voice was bitter. "I'm not likely to forget. Every one of those five appeals for inquiry came from friends or relatives of women who have some physical disability, or some facial blemish that would put them at a disadvantage in the national pastime of husband-hunting. Of course those poor lonely lambs could be led to the slaughter by some unscrupulous devil who flattered them, and promised them—whatever he promised."

Teccard fiddled with pipe and pouch. "Well, that thigh bone had been broken. In two places. While she was living, I mean."

Helen Dixon turned from where she was perched on the window sill. "The left leg?"

"Yair. Wasn't there one of those dames—"

"Ruby Belle Lansing." The sergeant eyed the oilcloth with repugnance. "Spinster. Thirty-six. Grade-school teacher in Tannersville. Hip broken in automobile accident. Double fracture, set at Catskill Memorial Hospital. Entered into correspondence with the *Herald of Happiness* in August, two years later. Came to New York in October, after being introduced by mail to Phillip Stanton, then of Four-seven-six-o Madison Avenue, this city."

The lieutenant consulted his report sheet. "Length of femur, eighteen and one-tenth inches. Let's see—factor for women is three and six-tenths. About sixty-five inches tall. Would this Lansing—"

"She was just five feet five, Jerry. By the Tannersville Board of Education records. What must have been more important to Stanton, Ruby Belle had a little more than two thousand dollars in the savings bank at Phoenicia. Three days after her arrival, she had this deposit transferred to the Emigrant Bank here. On the next day it was withdrawn, except for ten dollars. Since then, there hasn't been a trace of her. Or of Stanton!"

"Any description of him?"

HELEN shrugged. "Nothing to count. He never went to Tannersville. Her uncle—the one who asked us for a check-up—said he saw a snap-shot of Stanton. But all he remembers is, the fellow was good-looking and had a mustache."

"That's a great big help!" Teccard called for a policeman to take the thigh-bone back to the morgue. "What about the people where Stanton lived?"

"A rooming house. Man who runs it is nearly blind. Stanton didn't seem to use the room much, anyway. Half the time the bed wasn't disturbed. Best I could get was, he was kind of dark."

"Ah! Send out an all-borough to pick up dark guy with mustache! And reserve Central Park to hold 'em in! Yair! How about the other four who're miss-

ing? Same skunk, each time?"

Helen bent over the oilcloth, peered at the brown fiber again. "I wish I could remember what that stuff makes me think of. About the man or men in the other cases—I'm up against one of those things, Jerry. The disappearances were strangely similar. In every instance, the man resided in New York. The woman involved always lived in some small town, upstate. And every time the man sent the woman a ticket to come to the big city. What's more, flowers were invariably sent. Can you tie that? A bouquet for the unseen bride! Also, every one of the five women dropped out of sight within three or four days—after sending for their hometown funds."

"All cut from the same pattern!"

"I thought so, at first. But the men in each of the cases had different names. Different addresses."

"What the hell! A crook of that kind could pick out a new alias or a new address as easy as you choose a blue plate!"

"I saw some of the letters these men wrote. In the agency files. The hand-writings don't bear any resemblance."

"He could fake them. Or get someone else to write them for him."

"Not usual, is it? A murderer taking someone into his confidence? Unless it's a gang. Which it might be, from the varying descriptions of the men—according to their photos. There was always a snapshot, you see. One of the Happiness rules. One man had a beard. Another was partly bald. One was around fifty. The fellow in the Schwartz case couldn't have been more than twenty-five, the victim's brother claims. You wonder I've been stymied?"

Teccard spread his hands. "We'll have to go at it from this end. That oilcloth probably came from the five-and-dime—be tough to trace. But if this killer chopped the Lansing woman up, there'd have been more than a thigh bone to dispose of. Not so easy to get rid of a cadaver. And he slipped up this once. If he was careless again, we'll get somewhere. I've put a crew from the precinct on that. They'll sift the whole damn waterfront through a sieve, if necessary."

The sergeant sauntered toward the

door. "I hope you beat me to it, Jerry," she said. "I haven't been sleeping so well, lately. Thinking about some other poor, lonely fool on her way to meet a murderer. If this guy—or this gang—has got away with it five times, there won't be any stop now. It's about time for another one. They've been spaced about a month apart."

Teccard frowned. "I thought you said you were up a blind alley on it. What do you mean, beat you to it?"

She smiled, tightly. "I didn't say I was licked. I still have a card to play."

"If we're going to work together—"

"That would be all right with me. But this is something you couldn't very well come in on. I'm entered in Cupid's Competition."

He jumped to his feet. "Now what the hell!"

SHE nodded calmly. "Current issue of the *Herald of Happiness*, Meeting Place of the Matrimony-Minded Department. 'Miss Mary Lownes, single, thirty-one. Of Malone, New York. Pleasant disposition. Capable housewife, though suffering from slight spinal complaint. Occupation, nurse.' I was, you know, before I turned policewoman. 'Anxious to meet amiable, sober businessman under fifty.' That ought to get him, don't you think?"

"Just because you were assigned to an investigation doesn't mean you're supposed to risk running up against a killer, Helen."

"After the slimy specimens I've been running up against, a murderer'll be a relief. This chasing up and down subways and elevateds to trap exhibitionists, those hours of sitting through double features to nab mashers in the act—that's not only hard work, but it kind of gets you to thinking half the world's made up of perverts."

"Yair. But that's the sort of stuff only a woman can handle. Homicide isn't for the Woman's Bureau. It's a man's job."

"It's my job to put a stop to any matrimonial agency that's doing business like this—to see that love-hungry women don't get murdered when they figure on getting married."

"You find the man. We'll put a stop

to it—without your getting into it."

"That would suit me swell. But it might not work. I may have to get into it, to find the evidence necessary to convict."

The lieutenant put his fists on his hips and glared. "Hey! You don't mean you'd go so far as to marry the murdering so-and-so?"

"I'll go as far as I have to, Jerry. Maybe you've forgotten I had a sister who fell for a slimy snake like this Stanton. Alice turned on the gas one night—without lighting it. I found her body. I hate men like that worse than those phony abortionists I rounded up this spring. At least those girls knew they were taking a terrible chance. These poor, misguided love-seekers don't even realize their danger until it's too late." There was a dull, hurt look in her gray eyes. "But so far, there's been no proof that any of these women wound up with any legal certificates. No record of any licenses at City Hall, even."

"God's sake, Helen! You know the regulations forbid any infraction of ordinances in attempting to trap a criminal!"

"Nothing criminal about getting married, is there, Jerry?"

He opened his mouth, shut it again, glared at her. When he spoke, it was in the tone of a commanding officer. "You let me know before you go through with any damn nonsense like that, hear?"

She saluted stiffly. "Yes, Lieutenant."

Chapter II

LIEUTENANT TECCARD wasn't more than a minute behind Helen Dixon in leaving the office. The police clerk by the rail in the outer room looked out of the corner of his mouth to a clothesman one-fingering on a typewriter.

"Geeze! The lieutenant musta just swallowed a cup of carbolic or something."

"Teccard? He always looks like that when the Dixon dame gives him 'No' for an answer. He's been carrying the torch for her so long he sleeps standing up, like the Statue of Liberty."

Hurrying outside, the detective-lieu-

tenant drove his department sedan up Broadway to Twenty-eighth, studied the directory board in the lobby of a ten-story office building there, pushed into the elevator.

The *Herald of Happiness* was housed in a single room at the rear of the third floor. The door was locked, but there was a bulky shadow moving against the ground glass. He rapped.

The man who let him in was fat. Tiny purple veins laced the end of a bulbous nose. The eyes that searched the lieutenant's were slightly bloodshot.

"You the proprietor of this agency, mister?" Teccard demanded.

"I am, sir. T. Chauncey Helbourne, if I can be of service to you. You are a subscriber?"

"I'm from Police Headquarters."

"What, again? I've already put up with a distressing amount of annoyance from a Miss Dixon—"

"You'll be putting up with a prison diet, if you're not careful."

"Prison! You can't frighten me, sir. I run a legitimate business."

"Nuts! You come close to being a professional panderer. Don't tell me you have a license. It doesn't cover complicity in fraud!"

Helbourne's neck reddened. "I won't be bulldozed by any such tactics, Officer!"

"Lieutenant — Lieutenant Teccard." He surveyed the cheap furniture, the unpainted rack of pigeon-holes along one wall.

"It makes no difference to me if you're the commissioner, himself," snapped Helbourne. "I have influential connections at City Hall, too. And my records are always open for inspection by authorized parties."

"Okay. I'm an authorized party. I'll have a look at any letters that've come in here the last week or so."

The fat man waved vaguely at the row of green-painted files. "Help yourself. It would take me a couple of months to locate 'em. I don't file by dates."

"I'll make a start at it." Teccard pulled out a steel drawer marked "L." He ran his thumb along the tabs until he came to one with the letters "LO," took out all the folders in that section.

"How many letters you rake in, per

day, mister?" he asked.

"You mean the preliminaries?"

"What the hell is a preliminary?"

There was a folder with the name "Mary Lownes" at the top. It was empty, except for an envelope in Helen's handwriting, addressed to *Herald of Happiness*, and a clipped-out advertisement.

Helbourne picked up a proof-sheet of a page. "Subscribers are allowed one free advertisement to each subscription," he explained, "plus as many answers to other advertisements as they wish. Our only restriction is, these replies to ads must be addressed to the box number of the *Herald*." He pointed to one. "Any letters coming in, addressed to that box number, are copied and sent along to the advertiser, no charge. Without the name or address of the sender, naturally."

Teccard slid the folders back in place. "The old come-on. What do you tap them for giving out with the address?"

The proprietor of the *Herald* frowned. "Our fee is five dollars."

"At each end of the transaction? Five from the sappy skirt who wants the address of some dope who's given her a line of mush? And another five from the dope himself, if he wants to get in touch with her direct?"

"I don't like the way you put it, Lieutenant."

"Catch them coming and going, don't you? Next thing you know, you'll catch five years in the pen."

TECCARD drifted toward the rack of pigeon-holes. There were letters and folded carbon copies in most of them. Under each space was pasted a copy of some *Herald* advertisement. Helbourne watched him sullenly.

"I'm not responsible for what my subscribers do after I've performed an introduction," the fat man grumbled.

"Hell you aren't! You're wide open for prosecution. You were warned some New York crumb has been rooking old maids from upstate, using you as a go-between."

There was a cubby-hole with two letters, over an advertisement reading:

YOUNG LADY OF BREEDING
seeks companionship of amiable, sober businessman, under fifty, with quiet tastes. One

who would appreciate a better-than-average table and a comfortable home. Not wishing to be supported, as have slight means of own. Able and active, though slight spinal injury. Brunette, thirty-one, former trained nurse. Box LL27.

Helen was a brunette—the age and references to the spinal injury and having been a nurse clinched it. Teccard reached for the letters.

The fat man caught his arm. “You’ll have to get a court order, if you’re going to ransack my mail, Lieutenant.”

Teccard disengaged the pudgy fingers. “One side, mister. A minute ago you told me to help myself. I am. You want any trouble, I’ll see you get plenty.”

He crackled the letters open. The first one read:

Dear Miss Box LL27.

Your ad made a great deal of an appeal to me. I am a farmer, widower five years now, age forty-six. It’s a seventy-acre fruit farm, paying good, too. I have a piano, radio, Chevrolet, nice furniture. The part about better than average cooking appealed to me. Do you play the piano? Hoping to hear from you,

Very sincerely yours,
Herman Schichte
Rural Route Six
Pathanville, N. Y.

The lieutenant stuck it back in the pigeonhole. “Park your pants in a chair, mister. It makes me nervous to have anyone reading over my shoulder.”

Helbourne sat down. His mouth was open and he was panting as if he’d been climbing stairs. He kept rubbing his palms on his knees while he watched Teccard run through the other letter.

Your message in the Herald was like music heard far off over the water at night. Perhaps I am wrong, dear LL27, but I sense in your heart an aching desire for the finer things which life too often denies those best fitted to enjoy them. If I have understood you rightly, your appeal for companionship strikes a very sympathetic chord in my own soul. I am thirty-five, dark and, though no Adonis, not bad to look upon, I have been told. I have a comfortable business and am fond of travel, theater and books. Possibly you would care to write me so we could exchange photographs and perhaps—quien sabe—perhaps some day rings to symbolize even more than companionship!

With eager anticipation,
Your friend,
Harold Willard
971 East 88th Street
New York City

Teccard put the letter in his pocket. East Eighty-eighth wasn’t so far from the pier where that grisly bone had been found.

“This Harold Willard,” he said. “Let’s see the other letters you’ve had from him.”

Helbourne shook his head quickly. “That’s the only one. I never heard of the man before. I can’t keep track—”

“Yair. I heard that one. You recognize his signature?”

“No. Not at all.”

“You sent the copy of this drool along to Box LL Twenty-seven?”

“Not yet,” Helbourne said. “It was going out today.”

“Don’t send it. And don’t send out copies of any letters that come to you from New York City. Not until I’ve had a look at them. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Helbourne held his head sideways, as if he expected the lieutenant to take a punch at him. “Is there—ah—any cause for you to believe the writer of that letter has been involved in these—ah—irregularities you are investigating?”

Teccard stuffed a copy of the *Herald* into his coat pocket. “Only that he writes phony as hell. You ought to have your butt booted for handling that kind of sewage. And if I find you’ve passed on any more of it, I’m coming back and rub your nose in it.”

IT WAS dusk when the sedan reached the Twenty-third Precinct station house. Teccard was glad to get out of the chill wind whistling across Harlem from the river.

“Cap Meyer around?” he inquired of the desk sergeant.

“You’ll find him in the muster room, with a couple boys from Homicide, Lieutenant.”

Teccard strode into the back room. Four men stood about the long table under a green-shaded bulb. Three were in plain clothes, the fourth was in uniform. There was a black rubber body-bag at the end of the table, at the other a piece of wax paper with a grisly collection as the Identification man had ever seen.

“What you got, Meyer?” he asked.

The captain turned. His face was a

curious greenish-yellow in the cone of brilliance. "I wouldn't know, Teccard. But whatever it is, you can have it."

One of the Homicide men finished tying a tag to the third finger of a skeleton hand. "All we're sure of, it was an adult female."

His partner stripped off a pair of rubber gloves. "That's all you'll ever establish for certain. Person who hacked this woman up was pretty tricky." He indicated the cracked and flattened end of the finger bones. "Mashed the tips to prevent any print-work."

of some fillings left," he observed. "Jaw still shows where she had some bridge-work done. We can check the dentists, up around Tannersville."

"You got a line on her already?" Captain Meyer exclaimed.

"Yair. Schoolteacher who thought she was coming to town for her wedding. 'Till death do ye part.' It parted her, to hell and gone, didn't it?" He turned away. "How about letting me have one of your men who knows the Eighty-eighth Street beat? In the nine hundreds."

WOULD YOU LIKE A SWEETHEART?

CHARLES WALLACE, of Frankfort, Ind., confided to a buddy that he was lonely and would like to have a sweetheart. A few days later the buddy showed him a picture of a beautiful girl. He said she lived in Terre Haute, but that he knew the girl's sister and could arrange a meeting. Delighted, Wallace wrote letters to the girl and gave them to his friend to forward. He also enclosed money from time to time. It seemed she had medical bills. Also she was behind in the rent for her apartment and there was the matter of a train ticket for her to Frankfort, where she was going to meet him.

When—\$350 later—she didn't show up, Charles Wallace, disappointed and alarmed, went to police to find out what happened to the light of his life. Police discovered there was a simple explanation for her absence—she'd never existed.

His buddy had composed the incoming letters and pocketed the outgoing cash!

—Manly E. David



Meyer tongued around his stub of cigar. "Wasn't necessary, though. The rats took care of that."

The uniformed man spoke up. "All this mess had been dumped under the shore end of that Ninety-eighth Street pier, Lieutenant. There was a loose plank there—somebody must of ripped it up. It was near covered by muck, but we shoveled it out and used the hose on it, well as we could."

"Including that thigh-bone, we got everything but one foot now," the first Homicide man said. "But it wouldn't do any good to try a reconstruction. All the teeth were hammered out of that head, before it was dropped in the mud."

Teccard bent over the yellowish skull, stained with dirty, grayish mold. "Parts

Meyer and the uniformed man looked at each other. The captain gestured. "Patrolman Taylor, here, had that beat up to a month ago. How long you need him?"

"Depends. Bird we're after may have flown the coop already."

"Okay. You're relieved, Taylor. And if you have any trouble when it comes to putting the arm on the louse who did this"—the captain jerked his head toward the table—"do me one favor."

The policeman touched the rim of his cap. "Yuh?"

"Shoot him a couple times where it'll really hurt. All he'll feel, if he goes to the chair, will be a few seconds' jolt. Way I feel, that'd be lett'ng him off easy."

Chapter III

OUT in the car, Patrolman Taylor pulled a folded-up newspaper from his hip pocket.

"That kid who found the leg this morning squawked all over the neighborhood," he complained. "We warned him to keep his puss shut, but the papers got it just the same."

Teccard didn't read the story. "They can't print much," he said, "if they don't know any more than we do, Taylor. What you know about Number Nine-seven one?" He pulled up half a block away.

The patrolman craned his neck. "Nine-seven-one? The old brick house? Nothing much. Just four-or-five-bucks-a-week furnished rooms. No apartments."

"Who runs it?"

"Old dodo named Halzer. Him and his wife. They got Nine-six-nine, too—operate 'em together. He's harmless, stewed about half the time."

"Yair? You ever hear of a guy name of Harold Willard in this parish?"

"Harold Willard. Harold Willard. I don't recall it, Lieutenant. What's he look like?"

"Dark, about thirty-five years old. That's all we've got to go on. My guess is he fancies himself for a double of one of the movie stars. Likely to be a flashy dresser."

"Can't seem to place him. Maybe he's just moved in. They keep coming and going in a joint like this."

"Yair. If he happens to be in now, we'll keep him from going."

"We can do that, Lieutenant. There's no back doors on this side of the block."

"You go ahead, then. Go into Nine-six-nine. Find out from Halzer what room Willard has. When you know, stand in the door of Nine-six-nine and wait for me to come past. You can give me the high sign without anyone watching you from one of the windows next door."

"Check."

"And after I go in, nobody comes out. I mean nobody. Until I say so."

"Got you, Lieutenant." The patrolman strolled idly away.

Teccard stood on the curb, tamping out his pipe. He gazed curiously up at the lighted windows of 971. What kind of murderer could it be who took such care to hack his victim to pieces, only to attempt to hide all the remains in one spot? There had been other instances of dismembered corpses in the records of the Criminal Identification Bureau but, so far as Teccard could remember, limbs and head and torso had invariably been strewn far and wide, to prevent any reconstruction of the body.

Was he up against one of those unpredictable, pathological cases of sadism, where mutilation gives the killer a diabolical satisfaction? That didn't seem to match up with the carefully planned disposition of the victim's funds.

Taylor showed, in the areaway of 969. The lieutenant walked along briskly.

"Third floor rear," the policeman whispered hoarsely. "Room J."

Teccard didn't turn his head or answer. He marched up the steps to 971. The front door was unlatched. There was a row of battered, black tin mailboxes. He paused just long enough to make sure one of them bore a piece of paper with the penciled scrawl: "Harold M. Willard." Then he went in.

The hallway smelled of cooking grease and antiseptic, the carpeting on the stairs was ragged. Somebody was playing a radio. A baby squalled. There was a sound of running water from a bathroom somewhere on the second floor.

Over the sill of Room J was a thread of yellow light. Someone was moving about in the room, but Teccard, with his ear to the panel, heard nothing else. He transferred his gun from his left armpit to the right pocket of his coat, kept his grip on the butt.

He knocked and, without waiting, raised his voice.

"Telegram for Mr. Willard!"

The movement behind the door ceased. There was a pause, then a voice mumbled, "Slide it under the door."

TTECCARD kept his voice high. "You got to sign a receipt, mister."

"Shove your receipt book under, too. I'll sign it." The answer came from halfway down the door—the man inside was trying to look through the keyhole.

"The book won't go under. You want the telegram or not?"

Another pause. "Wait a second. I'm not dressed."

"Okay." Teccard tried to make it sound weary.

"Where's the wire from?" The man had moved away from the door, but the tone was strangely muffled.

"We ain't allowed to read telegrams, mister. If you don't want to accept it—" The door opened.

The man was in his underclothes. He stood sideways, so Teccard couldn't get a good look at him. His black hair was rumpled, he held a towel up over his mouth and the side of his face, as if he'd just finished shaving.

"Is there anything due—" He reached out with his other hand.

The lieutenant stepped in, fast.

"Yair. You're due, mister. Put down—"

There was a faint "Hunh!" from behind the door, the uncontrollable exhalation of breath when a person exerts himself suddenly.

Teccard whirled.

The blow that caught him across the top of the head knocked him senseless before his knees started to buckle. . . .

Patrolman Taylor poured a tumbler of water over Teccard's head. "Take it easy, now. Amby'll be here any second."

The lieutenant rolled over on his side. "Quit slopping that on my head." The floor kept tilting away from him, dizzily. "Lemme have it to drink."

The cop filled the glass from a broken-lipped pitcher. "You been bleeding like a stuck pig."

Teccard paused with the tumbler at his lips. Was that a pair of shoes lying on the floor behind the patrolman? He shook his head, to clear away the blurriness.

"Who in hell is that?" he cried.

Taylor's jaw went slack. "That's the lad you was battling with. You fixed his wagon, all right!"

"I wasn't fighting with anybody! Someone slugged me from behind that door, before I could even get my gun out."

The lieutenant got his elbows under him, propped himself up. The man on

his back was T. Chauncey Helbourne—and his skin was leaden blue.

The officer nodded sympathetically. "A crack on the conk like you got will do that, sometimes. Make you forget what's been going on when you snap out of it."

Teccard felt the back of his neck. His fingers came away wet and sticky, the ache at the top of his skull was nauseating. "I didn't kill him, you dope!"

"Hell you had a right to drop him, didn't you! He was resisting arrest, wasn't he?"

Teccard crawled on hands and knees to the dead man's side. There was an irregular dark blot on Helbourne's vest, just inside the left lapel. In the center of the blot something gleamed yellow-red, under the naked bulb overhead. The lieutenant touched the fat man's face. It was still close to normal body temperature.

"You got him first clip out of the box." Taylor pointed to the gun on the floor, by the side of the iron cot.

Teccard stood up shakily, sat down again suddenly, on the sagging edge of the cot. Taylor, the corpse on the floor, the barren furnishings of the room, all seemed oddly far away. He bent over to let the blood get to his head again.

"Where's the other gent who was in here?" he asked. "The one in shorts?"

The uniformed man squinted as if the light hurt his eyes. "The only lug I saw is this stiff, Lieutenant."

Teccard closed his eyes to stop the bed from shimmying. "He let me in here. How'd he get downstairs, past you?"

OFFICER TAYLOR put up a hand to cover his mouth, his eyes opened wide. "I swear to God there wasn't a soul on them stairs when I come up. If there'd been a guy with his pants off—"

"How'd you happen to come up, anyway?"

"Why, hell, Lieutenant, when this dame comes scuttling down to the front door, yelling 'Police!' naturally I hot-foot over from next door."

"A woman?" Teccard demanded. "What kind of woman?"

"Why, just an ordinary mouse like you'd expect to find in one of these joints. Kind of blonde and plump—I

don't know."

"What'd she say?"

"She says, 'Officer, come upstairs quick. There's a couple of men fighting and making a terrible racket right over my room!' She says, 'Hurry!' So I figure it's you subduing this Willard and maybe needing a hand. I come up on the jump."

Teccard started to shake his head, thought better of it. "Where is she now? Bring her here."

The policeman pounded out in the hall, downstairs. He left the door open. There was an excited hum of voices from the corridor.

Teccard took a pencil out of his pocket, stuck it in the barrel of his own pistol, lifted it off the floor. He wrapped his handkerchief carefully about the butt, broke the weapon. Only one chamber had been fired from the .38. The bullet-hole in Helbourne's chest would be about right for that caliber.

Taylor came clumping upstairs. "She put one over on me. That room underneath ain't even occupied. And she's scrambled, anyway."

"So has the jerk who was half undressed." The lieutenant put down the revolver, poured himself another drink of water. "That's over the dam, so don't get fidgety about it. You were right, according to the way you figured it."

The cop wiped sweat off his forehead. "It's all balled up in my mind. Was this Willard the one who shot the fat boy, here?"

"Might have been. The gun was still in my pocket when I went down. Somebody took it out and used it on T. Chauncey Helbourne. Somebody else. Not me." Teccard gazed grimly around the room. "The worst of it is, I couldn't absolutely identify Willard, even now. He was covering his mush with a towel, and sort of kept his back to me, anyhow."

He didn't bring up the point that bothered him most—that it was a cinch Willard hadn't been the one who crowned him from behind that door. Maybe his unseen assailant had been Helbourne. In any case, what was the proprietor of the *Herald of Happiness* doing here, when he had claimed complete ignorance of Willard?

A siren wailed, out in the street.

"Holler down to the doc, Taylor. Tell him all he needs to bring up is a few stitches for my scalp."

"You'd ought to go to the hospital, Lieutenant. Have an X-ray, to be sure there ain't any fracture."

Teccard went over to the closet door, opened it. "There's nothing more the matter with my head than's been wrong with it for thirty-seven years. Did you buzz the station, too, Taylor?"

"Yes, sir. Cap Meyer is coming right over, himself, with a couple of the boys." Taylor went out into the hall, shouted down the stairwell.

The lieutenant sniffed at the empty closet. The only things in it were a few coat hangers and a sweet scent that made him think of church. Queer thing to find in a place like this; probably came from clothing that had been hung up here.

He looked around the room for the weapon with which he had been slugged. There wasn't anything heavier than a cane wastebasket. The wastebasket was empty, too, except for a crumpled piece of cellophane stripped from a pack of cigarettes. He fished it out with the point of his fountain-pen, put it on the bureau.

Chapter IV

THE interne arrived, went to work on the lieutenant's head with needle and sutures. Meyer and two plainclothesmen came up. While the doctor jabbed the needle through his scalp, Teccard told the captain what was wanted.

"Box up that cellophane, run it down to my office. There might be prints on it. Get a photographer up here from Homicide. Have him powder the knobs, the bureau drawers, the iron part of the bed, those hangers in the closet. Run a vacuum over the floor, ship the dust down to the lab for examination."

Meyer crouched over the fat man. "Who's this guy, Lieutenant?"

"Crumb who ran a matrimonial agency. That's what's back of those bones your boys dug up today. Go through his pockets, will you? And mark someone down for going through the house, here, to see what they can get on Willard."

Taylor, you learn anything about him from the landlord?"

The patrolman scratched his head. "Not much. Oh, one funny thing. He must have a night job. Because he only comes here in the daytime. And he must write a lot of letters, because practically the only thing old Halzer remembers his having up here, outside his clothes, is a box of writing paper and a bottle of ink."

"Yair? See can you find if he threw any of his scribbling in the wastebasket. Maybe some of it is still in the trash-can."

Meyer said: "Not much dough, but plenty of unpaid bills on this fella. He's been hitting the high spots, you ask me. Here's a credit jewelry store summons for non-payment on a diamont wrist-watch. And a bunch of duns from department stores and an automobile company." He tossed the sheaf of papers on the bed. "Eleven fish and some chicken feed, a cheap ticker, two nickel cigars, a silk handkerchief stinking of whisky, and a bunch of keys."

"No weapons?"

"Not even a pen-knife, Lieutenant. You're pretty positive he wasn't the fella cut up that girl's body?"

"He'd have been well-padded with folding money, in that case, Cap. No. You rustle around, get a description of Harold Willard."

Teccard waited until the doctor growled, "Kind of a patchwork job, Lieutenant. You'd be smart to take a couple days sick leave. That's an ugly gash."

"If that stuff about the stitch in time is on the up and up, you must have saved about ninety-nine of 'em. Thanks. I'll be around for you to rip them out again." He picked up the keys. "I might use these, Cap."

"Want Taylor to go with you?"

"No." Teccard examined his hat. There was a right angle cut where the brim joined the crown. He smoothed the felt thoughtfully. "You might let me have a gun, though. Mine'll have to go to Ballistics."

Meyer brought out an automatic. "You can take Betsy, if you don't mind a big caliber."

The corners of Teccard's mouth curled

up. "A forty-five is just the ticket."

"You after big game?"

"Yair." Tecard checked the magazine to make sure it was loaded. "You ever go after moose, Cap?"

"Moose? Hell, no. Duck is my limit."

"Well, when a guy goes after moose, he uses a horn that makes a sound like a female moose. The bull comes a-running—and the hunter does his stuff."

A puzzled scowl wrinkled Meyer's forehead. Teccard grinned.

"I'm going to get me a horn, Cap. But there's nothing in the book says for the rest of you to stop hunting."

He went downstairs. . . .

THE night elevator man in the building housing the *Herald of Happiness* regarded Teccard coldly. "Who you want to see on the third, mister?"

"Just giving the premises the once-over." The lieutenant held his badge out on his palm. "Snap it up. I haven't got all night."

"Ain't anyone up on that floor."

"That's why I'm going up. Do I push the lever myself?"

The car started. "I can't have people going in and out alla time. I'll lose my job."

"Don't worry about it. Everything's strictly copacetic."

The elevator door clanged loudly. Teccard swung around the corner of the corridor into the ell where Helbourne's office was located—and stopped short. Somewhere ahead of him a light had been suddenly extinguished. He stood still, listening. There were none of the noises to be expected when an office is being closed for the night. No door opened.

He balanced the heavy automatic in his left hand, held the keys in his right, tightly, so they wouldn't rattle. Quietly, on the balls of his feet, he moved to the *Herald's* door. Still he heard nothing, except the faraway roar of Broadway. He tried the key which showed the most signs of use. The latch turned. He stepped aside swiftly to the right, kicked the door open.

If there was anyone inside, the only target would be Teccard's hand, holding the pistol. He snaked his wrist around the jamb of the door, fumbled for the

light switch he knew must be there. It clicked. The office flooded with brilliance.

There was a laugh.

"Kamerad!"

He swore under his breath, stepped out into the doorway. She was sitting back in Helbourne's chair, her feet cocked upon the desk. There was a pile of letters in her lap, a flashlight in one hand and a short-barreled .32 in the other.

"Imagine meeting you here," he said drily. "I phoned the Policewomen's Bureau for you. They knew from nothing!"

Sergeant Dixon took her high heels off the desk. "I've been using the super's passkey every night for the last two weeks. How'd you get in?"

He jangled the keys. "Property of T. Chauncey Helbourne. For the evidence clerk."

She looked at him sharply. "Evidence? Is Helbourne—dead?"

Teccard sat down on the edge of the desk. "That's what happens when you take a slug under the fourth rib."

"Who shot him, Jerry?" The sergeant tossed the letters on the desk, stood up.

"There seems to be a general impression I did. The bullet came from my Regulation, all right. But I'd say the killer was the same one who did away with Ruby Belle."

She saw the bandage on the back of his head. "Jerry! You were in it! You're hurt!"

"Yair." He managed a lop-sided grin. "That was no love-tap. Somebody dropped the boom on me, but good."

She reached up, lifted his hat off gently. "That was close, Jerry."

"They meant to kill me, at first. Changed their minds when they fished through my pockets, found my badge."

"They? Were there two of them? Besides Chauncey?"

The lieutenant nodded. "One kayoed me while I was putting the gun on the other one. I went bye-bye before I got a square look at either of them. They both scrambled. Now they know we're closing in, they'll be foxier than ever. If they've got anything on the fire, they may try to pull it off before they do the vanishing act. But we'll have to move

fast, if we're going to catch up with them. That's why I came down here, to see if there might be any other poor boobs readied up for the kill."

"You might have asked me. Just because I spent two years putting fortune tellers out of business and running around to disorderly dance halls doesn't mean I've forgotten how to use my mind."

SHE held up a sheet of pink notepaper. "I dug this out of Helbourne's private postoffice, there. It has all the earmarks. Box KDD. A Miss Marion Yulett, seamstress of Algiers. Thirty-three. Possesses certain means of her own. Has a cheerful, home-loving disposition, yet is full of pep. Miss Yulett encloses five dollars to secure the address of a certain Peter Forst who apparently has been giving her a buildup about his charms."

"He lives in New York City?"

"Can't find any folder for Mr. Forst. Peculiar. Not even any letter to him—or from him."

Teccard chewed on his pipe-stem. Was Forst another of Willard's aliases? Had Helbourne been putting one over when he claimed to know nothing about other letters from the mysterious individual who always wrote from Manhattan?

"When did this deluded dame come through with Helbourne's fee?" he asked Helen.

"Week ago today."

The lieutenant reached for the phone. "Hustle me through to your super, pal.—Supervisor? This is Lieutenant Jerome Teccard, New York Police Department, Criminal Identification Bureau. Talking from Bryant Three-two-seven-nine-seven. Yair. Get me the chief of police of Algiers, New York, in a hurry, will you? Algiers is up near Whitehall. Yair.—I'll hang on."

While he was waiting, Teccard tried the only flat key from Helbourne's bunch on the locked middle drawer of the desk. It fitted. In the drawer was an empty cigarette carton, some paper matchbooks, an overdue bill from one printer and a sheaf of estimates from another, a half-full flask of Nip-and-Tuck Rye, and a torn, much-folded plain-paper envelope, addressed to the *Herald of*

Happiness, Box KDD!

The envelope had been postmarked three weeks ago, from Station U, New York City.

Helen looked up Station U. "East One Hundred and Sixth Street, Jerry."

"Same precinct as the bones. And friend Willard. One will get you ten that's where we find Brother Forst, too."

There was a voice in the receiver, Teccard held it to his ear, muttered "Yair" a few times, added "Much obliged, Chief," and racked the receiver.

"Too late. Sucker Yulett left Algiers on the morning train."

Helen punched the files with her fist angrily. "For New York?"

"Didn't know. Southbound, anyway."

The hurt look came into her eyes again.

Teccard shoved his hands into his pockets, gloomily. "All he did know—she had her suitcase, and the station agent said she was wearing a corsage."

Helen showed teeth that were clenched. "Those damned flowers again!"

"They'll probably last just long enough to be used on her casket," Teccard brooded. "Wait, though. We might still be in time."

"It wouldn't take her all day to get to New York!"

"It might. Station master didn't tell the chief what time the train left this A.M. Might have been late morning. And those trains up north of the capital run slower than a glacier. If the Yulett girl had to change at Albany, and wait—"

Helen got the phone first, called train information. It was busy. The sergeant kept pounding the desk with her fist until she got her connection.

Before she hung up, Teccard was asking: "Can we stop her?"

"Only train making connections from Algiers to New York arrives at Grand Central at eight-forty. Gives us about twenty minutes."

He caught her arm. "Hell it does! We'll have to burn rubber to make it. We can't wait until she gets off the train. We'll have to find her, convince her we're on the level, tip her off what she's to do. Chances are, Forst'll be waiting for her. We'd scare him off before we spotted him."

She was streaking down the corridor toward the elevator. "We catch the train at a Hundred and Twenty-fifth, come in with her?"

"If she's on it. If we can locate it. And if she'll listen to reason. That's a hell of a lot of ifs."

THE department sedan zoomed over to Park and Thirty-fourth, went through the red lights with siren screeching. They didn't stop to park at a Hundred and Twenty-fifth, but sprinted up the stairs as the conductor was giving the "Boa-r-r-r-d!" They made it.

The sergeant saw the bunch of lilies-of-the-valley first. "That sweet-faced one, in the dark blue coat and that gosh-awful hat, Jerry."

"Yair. You better break the ice. She'll be suspicious of a man."

Helen dropped into the empty seat beside the woman in the unbecoming hat. The lieutenant stayed a couple of paces in the rear.

"Miss Yulett?" the sergeant inquired softly. "You're Miss Marion Yulett, from Algiers, aren't you?"

The woman smiled sweetly, opened her bag, produced a small pad and a pencil.

Swiftly she wrote:

Sorry. I am hard of hearing.

Teccard smothered an oath. It wouldn't have mattered if she'd been crippled or scarred up. Helen would have been able to fix it so the Yulett woman could step into a ladies' room somewhere, and give her instructions on how to handle the man she was going to meet. But there wouldn't be time to write everything out in longhand, without arousing Forst's suspicions. And if the killer had an accomplice, as the lieutenant believed, this deaf woman couldn't hear what "Forst" and the other would be saying to each other. And that might prove to be the most important evidence of all!

Chapter V

HELEN scribbled away on the pad. Teccard sidled up along side so he could read.

I am Sergeant Helen Dixon from the N. Y. Policewoman's Bureau. Are you Marion Yulett?

The woman shrank back in her seat. "Yes. Why do you want me?" Her voice shook.

The pencil raced in Helen's fingers.

Only to save you unhappiness. Maybe worse. You plan to meet a man named Peter Forst?

"Yes. Is anything wrong?"

The sergeant held the pad out again.

We believe he's a killer who's murdered several women who became acquainted with him through the Herald. Have you a picture of him?

Miss Yulett fumbled nervously in her bag, produced a small, glossy snapshot. Teccard's forehead puckered up. This couldn't be a photo of Willard, by any possibility! The man in the snapshot was round-faced and pudgy-cheeked. He had a neatly trimmed goatee and his hair receded at the temples, from a high forehead!

Helen wrote:

How will Forst recognize you?

"I had my picture taken, too. I sent it to him day before yesterday." Miss Yulett bit her lip to keep from crying. "I'm afraid it wasn't a very good likeness—I don't photograph well. But I was wearing this hat and these beads"—she touched a necklace of imitation pink jade—"and I'm wearing his flowers, too." Tears began to stream down her cheeks, she turned her face toward the window. "You must be mistaken about Peter. His letters were so sweet and kind. I can't imagine his—hurting anybody."

The train began to slow for the track intersection in the upper yard. There was no time for softening the blow, with sympathy.

Helen made the pad say:

If he's the man we're after, he doesn't intend to marry you at all. If you have any money, he'll wheedle it away from you and then—Did he mention anything about money?

The words came out between convulsive sobs. "Only that he had a small and prosperous business. With a partner who wasn't—quite honest, perhaps. If

Peter and I—got—along, he said I might want to buy out this other man's interest. So my—my husband and I—could be partners."

The pencil moved so swiftly Teccard could hardly follow it.

Brace up now, Marion. We're getting in. Take off your hat. And your beads.

MISS YULETT dried her eyes on a handkerchief, did her best to smile, "You're going to meet him, with me, so he can have a chance to explain?"

No. I'm going to meet him. As you. Wearing your hat and beads. Unpin those flowers, too.

"But, please! Please let me—"

Don't waste time arguing. If he looks all right to me, I'll let you meet him later. I'll take your bag, too. You take mine. And wear my hat.

The disturbed woman unclasped her beads. "But what on earth am I to do? Where will I go? I don't know anybody but Peter."

The gentleman standing behind us is Police Lieutenant Teccard. He'll see that you get to a hotel. Stay where he tells you to until I can get in touch with you.

Teccard gripped Helen's shoulder. "No, you don't. You take Miss Yulett to the hotel. I'll meet pal Peter."

Sergeant Dixon looked up at him. "What evidence do you think you'd get out of him, Jerry? He's not the same man you ran into uptown, is he? As things stand, you haven't a thing on him."

"I'll sweat the evidence out of him, all right."

"Maybe you couldn't. There's always the possibility this fellow's on the level. If he is, I turn him over to Miss Yulett. If he isn't, I'll be able to give first-hand testimony as to how he operates. This is a job only a policewoman can handle effectively."

Teccard grimaced. "Put your gun in her bag, then. And don't be dainty about using it. Another thing—I'm going to turn Miss Yulett over to one of the pickpocket squad in the terminal and tail you and your intended."

"All right, as long as he doesn't spot

you." Helen adjusted the ridiculous brim of the hat, snapped the beads around her neck. Hastily, she used the pad once more.

Did Forst tell you where you were to stay in New York Or how soon you'd get married?

"As soon as we could get the license." Tears glistened in the woman's eyes again. "He said I could stay with his family. But I don't know just where they live."

"I bet Peter doesn't either," Teccard muttered, half beneath his breath.

HE WATCHED Helen go through the contents of Miss Yulett's bag—the little leather diary, the packet of envelopes like the one in Helbourne's desk drawer, the savings bank book.

The train slid alongside the concrete platform, and redcaps kept pace with the slowing cars.

Helen put her arm around Miss Yulett's shoulders, hugged her lightly. Teccard pulled down the worn, leather suitcase from the overhead rack.

"I'll get a porter for you," he told Helen.

"Don't be silly." The sergeant hefted the bag easily. "She wouldn't spend a quarter that way. So I won't." She nodded cheerfully at the woman, joined the procession in the aisle.

Teccard got out his notebook, penciled:

I'm going to get a detective to take you to the Commodore Hotel. Right here in the station. Register and stay right in your room until Sergeant Dixon comes for you. Don't worry about your bag or expenses. We'll take care of them. Understand?

She didn't hide her fear. "Yes. But I'm afraid."

He patted her shoulder. "Nothing to be scared—" he said before he realized she wasn't reading his lips.

He followed her out to the platform, located one of the boys on the Terminal Squad, told him what he wanted done.

"Keep her here on the platform for a while, too. Better take her out through one of the other gates, in case the man we're after is still waiting. Phone my office and tell them her room number. Notify the desk at the hotel to route all calls to her room through the office of

one of the assistant managers."

He tipped his hat to Miss Yulett, left her staring blankly at the bandage on the back of his head. The poor soul must be scared stiff, he knew. Well, better than *being* a stiff.

He had managed to keep sight of Helen's abominable hat, thirty or forty yards ahead. He put on steam to catch up with her. She was playing the part of the timidly anxious woman to the hilt, searching the faces of the crowd lining the ropes at the gate with just the right amount of hesitancy.

Teccard couldn't see anyone who resembled the snapshot. He was completely unprepared for what happened when a young man of thirty or so stepped abruptly out of the thinning crowd and took the sergeant's suitcase.

Except for the exaggerated sideburns, his thin, clean-cut features could have been called handsome, in a sinister sort of way. If it hadn't been for the cream-colored necktie against the extravagantly long-pointed soft collar of his mauve shirt, he might have been considered well-dressed.

There was no goatee, none of the full roundness of the face in Miss Yulett's snapshot. Yet Teccard was sure he recognized the man. He had seen those dark eyebrows only in side view, the deeply cleft chin had been covered with a towel when the lieutenant had pointed a gun at him, but this would be Harold Willard, beyond much doubt.

Teccard couldn't get too close to them. "Willard" or "Forst" or whatever his name was, would be certain to recognize the man who had crashed the room on Eighty-eighth Street! How could the lieutenant shadow them without being spotted himself?

Evidently this Willard knew that Miss Yulett was deaf, for he showed no surprise when Helen offered him the pad. But apparently there was some difference of opinion going on. The sergeant was shaking her head, as if bewildered.

When her escort took her arm and led her across the great central lobby, toward the subway entrance, she evidently protested. She made her way to one of the marble shelves alongside the ticket windows, pointed vehemently to the pad.

Willard began to write furiously.

Teccard bought a newspaper, unfolded it, kept it in front of his face so he could just see over the top. Unobtrusively he edged within a dozen feet.

"But I don't understand." Helen was gazing at Willard in obvious fascination. "You're so much better-looking. Why did you send me another man's photograph?"

The young man favored her with a dazzling smile, proffered her a sheet from the pad.

She read it, crumpled it, seemed to thrust it into the pocket of her jacket. "I would have liked you even more, Peter, if you had trusted me—told me the truth."

THEY moved on toward the Lexington Avenue subway. The man was having difficulty holding up his written end of the conversation. He kept setting the bag down, scribbling rapidly, then seizing her arm and rushing her along again.

Teccard followed them through the stile, downstairs to the uptown platform. They boarded the rear of one crowded car. The lieutenant squeezed onto the front platform of the car behind. He saw Helen's hand release the crumpled paper before she was pushed into the car. People surged in like a mob pressing to the scene of a fire. Teccard struggled through the door over the car-couplings, into the space Helen had just vacated. He stooped, retrieved the paper.

He held it down at his side, unfolded it, and read:

I wanted to be certain you were not attracted to me merely because of my looks, darling. That's why I sent you the other picture. Now I am sure you will love me for what I really am, not merely what I seem to be. Is that not better, dear one?

Teccard spat out a sibilant oath, jammed the paper in his pocket. The doors closed, the train rumbled out of the station.

He searched the crowded car aisle, ahead. They must have found seats somehow.

He unfolded the newspaper again, elbowed his way slowly forward.

They were nowhere in the car. Long before the brakes had screamed for the

Eighty-sixth Street stop, he knew they were nowhere on the train.

Teccard was in a cold rage as he shoved through the throng and up to Eighty-sixth Street. Willard had made a sucker of him with the old on-again, off-again, Finnegan—gone in the rear door, made his way, with Helen in tow, up by the side door at the middle of the subway car and at the last instant stepped off to the platform while the lieutenant was perusing the note Helen had dropped.

Of course, the sergeant couldn't have stopped the man without giving her hand away. Of course, also, Willard must have caught a glimpse of Teccard. Now that make-love-by-mail guy would be on his guard, and likely to suspect Helen. Teccard had dragged her into this mess, by requesting her assignment from the Policewomen's Bureau. Now she was literally in the hands of a cold-blooded killer!

By force of habit, he called the Telegraph Bureau first, to get the alarm out for the dark-haired young man. The description was complete now. Teccard was good at estimating weight, height, age. Long experience in the Criminal Identification Bureau made him remember points that the average policeman wouldn't have noticed—"his ears are funny, kind of pointed at the top of the helix. He brushes his hair to cover them as much as he can. And his chin looks as if somebody had started to drive a wedge into it. And don't forget, this man is sure to be armed and dangerous."

Then the lieutenant called Captain Meyer and repeated the description.

"Send a car around to check every man on beat, will you, Cap? Odds are good he hangs out in this parish somewhere. Have 'em keep an eye out for Sergeant Dixon. She'll be with him."

Chapter VI

WHEN Teccard called his office, he half expected to find a report from Helen waiting for him. He was wrong. And the office didn't have much—there hadn't been any prints on the cellophane, too many on the knobs and furniture in the Eighty-eighth Street room. They

hadn't been able to find any of record, though.

Talking with the Telegraph Bureau had given him an idea. He called Western Union, located the night traffic manager.

"There was a bunch of flowers wired from this city to Miss Marion Yulett in Algiers, upstate, some time this A.M. Chances are they went through Floral Telegraph Delivery. Find out what shop put in the order, will you? Buzz me back."

He fumed and stewed in the drug store phone booth for what seemed like an hour. When he passed the clock over the soda fountain, on his way out, he found it had been seven minutes.

The address the telegraph company had given him was only a few blocks away. He didn't bother with a cab, but went on the run. Over to Second, up to Eighty-seventh. There it was, next to the undertaker's place in the middle of the block:

THE REMEMBRANCE SHOP

Potted ivy and cactus in the window, flanked by lilies and dried grasses in tin vases. Inside, a glass-front icebox with cut flowers, roses and carnations.

Carnations! Now he knew why that fragrance in the closet had reminded him of church. There has always been a big bunch of white carnations in front of the pulpit, when he was a kid. Willard must have had a carnation in the button-hole of a coat he'd hung up in the closet.

Inside the shop a girl stood talking to the shirt-sleeved man behind the counter. As Teccard walked in she was saying: "You'll send those wreaths over to the sexton right away? He's waiting for them."

The florist nodded impatiently. "I'll get 'em over right away." He turned inquiringly toward the lieutenant. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Teccard drew a deep breath. This was the man in the snapshot! Round face, goatee, receding hair!

"You can tell me who ordered some lilies of the valley wired to a lady up in Algiers, New York."

"Was there some complaint?" asked the florist.

"Just checking up on the person who

sent them. I'm from the Police Department."

The girl paused, on her way out, to stare at him out of stolid blue eyes set deep in a square, pleasant face.

"Police! What's the matter the police should come around?" The man waved his arms excitedly.

Teccard said softly, "You have a duplicate record of your F.T.D. orders. Let's see it."

The florist ran stubby fingers through his hair, dug a flat, yellow book out of the debris on a bookkeeping desk. He ruffled the pages. "It ain't against the law, sending flowers like this!"

The carbon copy of the wired order wasn't helpful. All it indicated was that Peter Forst had paid two dollars and fifty cents to have a corsage delivered to Miss Marion Yulett at Algiers.

"Who took the order?"

"Nobody. The envelope was under the door when I'm opening the shop this morning. With the cash. What's the matter, eh?"

Teccard's hand clamped on the man's wrist. "You sent those posies yourself, Mr. Forst."

"Forst! What's it, Forst?" The man's eyes narrowed. "I'm George Agousti. I run this business, no nonsense. I pay taxes."

The lieutenant's grip remained firm. "Then someone's been framing you, Agousti."

"Framing me? For what!"

"Murder." Teccard spoke quietly.

AGOUSTI recoiled as from a blow. "It's terrible mistake you making. So much as a single flea, I ain't ever hurt."

"You don't know this Peter Forst?"

"The first time I ever hear his name, so help me!"

"What about Harold Willard? Heard of him?"

The florist shook his head.

"You don't feel like talking, do you? Maybe you'd feel more like it if you came down to Headquarters with me."

Agousti shrugged. "I'm telling you. There ain't nothing on my conscience. I ain't afraid to go anywhere you like."

Teccard made one more try. He described the man Helen had gone with.

"Know him?"

Recognition crept into the florist's eyes. "I ain't dead sure. But from how you putting it, this one might be Stefan."

"Who's Stefan?"

"Stefan Kalvak. He's no good, a low life, sure."

"Yair, yair. Who is he? What's he do? Where's he live?"

"He's Miss Kalvak's brother. She really owns this shop. I run it for her. She's okay, fine. But Stefan's a bum, a stinker. Always stealing dough out the cash register when I don't watch. Or getting girls into trouble, you know."

"He's done his best to get you in trouble. He sent your picture to this girl up in Algiers, so she'd come to New York to get married."

"Holy Mother!"

"Where's he live?"

"You got me. His sister threw him out of her apartment. But you could phone her."

A freckle-faced boy burst into the shop. "My pa sent me for the ivy for ma's birthday, Mr. Agousti."

"All right, Billy. Excuse me, one second." The florist whisked out of sight, back of the showcase.

The boy jingled seventy-five cents on the counter, an elevated roared overhead, and Teccard began to sweat, thinking of Helen Dixon and Stefan Kalvak.

The youngster called, "Pa says you needn't bother to wrap it up, Mr. Agousti."

There was no answer from the rear of the shop, though the sound of the elevated had died away.

Teccard stepped quickly around the glass case.

Agousti was leaning, face down, over a wooden bench, his head under the spreading fronds of a potted palm. There was a dark puddle on the boards of the bench, and it widened slowly as drops splashed into it from the gash in the florist's neck.

A sharp-bladed knife that evidently had been used to cut flower stems lay with its point in the glistening disk of crimson. There was blood on Agousti's right hand, too. Teccard lifted the limp wrist, saw the slash across the base of

the fingers.

That settled it! A man didn't cut his hand that way when he slashed his own throat! The florist had been attacked from behind, while he was putting the ivy in a flowerpot. He had tried to block off the blade that was severing his jugular—and had failed.

Not five feet from the dead man's back was a rear delivery door, with a wire screen nailed over the glass. The door was closed, but not locked.

Teccard tore a piece of green, glazed paper from the roll fixed to the end of the bench, wrapped it around the knob and twisted it. Then he opened the door.

A narrow alley ran behind the two-story building. It was floored with cement. There wouldn't be any footprints on it—and there wasn't anyone in sight.

He came inside, shut the door. He stuck his nail file through the oval handle of the key, turned it until the bolt shot home.

The boy stuck his head around the corner of the glass case. Teccard stepped quickly between him and body.

"Is he sick?" the youngster began.

"Yair. You go home. Tell your father the ivy will be over later."

"Okay, mister. Gee, I'm sorry he's sick."

"Wait a minute, son. You seen Stefan Kalvak around tonight?"

The boy made a face. "Naw. Steve ain't never around, except with girls. I don't like him, anyways."

"You know where he lives?"

HE JERKED a thumb toward the ceiling. "I guess he lives right up over the flower store here."

Teccard was startled. "That so?" Maybe the kid didn't know about the sister tossing Stefan out on his ear.

The boy ran. When he'd gone, the lieutenant felt in the pockets of the dead man, without disturbing the position of the body. There was a leather container, with four Yale keys. He took them.

One of the keys fitted the front door. He used it, from the street. Then he stepped into the entranceway to the second floor stairs.

There was only one mail-box, a big brass one with a mother-of-pearl push

button and a neatly engraved card:

Vanya Kalvak
Floriculturist

He went up the stairs noiselessly.

There were two doors opening off the second-floor hall. The one nearest the front of the building had another of the engraved cards tacked to it.

He heard voices. They came from the room behind the door at the head of the stairs. The tones of the girl who'd asked Agousti to deliver the wreaths were distinct.

"Why do you come here, anyway, Miss Yulett?"

"Your brother brought me here," Helen answered. "He said it was all right."

Teccard's heart skipped a couple of beats. What was Helen doing talking? She must have been startled out of her wits by this other woman and been caught off guard.

"I'm very sorry for you, Miss Yulett."

"I don't understand! Why should you be?" The sergeant was still playing her part. "Peter said he would be back in a moment. He'll explain."

"Peter!" The other girl's tone was one of disgust. "His name is Stefan. Stefan Kalvak."

"It all seems queer. I can't imagine why he lied to me about his name. But you ought to know, since you're his sister."

The girl laughed harshly. "You stupid idiot! He is my husband."

"What!" The sergeant didn't have to fake that exclamation, Teccard thought.

"It is the truth. I am his wife, God forbid." The girl spat out the words. "I know what he told you. The same as he told those others."

"You're just trying to drive me away from him."

Teccard decided they were in the kitchen of the apartment. One of them kept moving about restlessly—probably Mrs. Kalvak.

"I'm trying to save your life. You don't know Stefan. He's a fiend, absolutely. After he's taken your money—Have you already given it to him?"

"No," Helen answered. "Tomorrow after we get the license, we will talk over buying the business."

"Tomorrow, you will be dead—if you do not let me help you get away."

"I should think you'd—hate me, Mrs. Kalvak. But honestly, I didn't know Peter—Stefan—was married."

"I don't care about you one way or the other. The reason I'm praying to God for you to get away quickly is that I don't want him caught."

"No?"

"I know what would happen to him, if the police got him. My eyes haven't been closed all these months. Stefan hasn't earned the money he's been spending. Nevertheless—I love him."

Chapter VII

A PHONE bell jangled in the front room. Mrs. Kalvak stalked away to answer it. Teccard waited until he heard her answering in monosyllables, then tried the door. It was locked.

"Helen," he whispered as loudly as he dared. "Helen!"

The sergeant didn't hear him.

Mrs. Kalvak was storming back into the kitchen. "You talk of lying!" she cried. "You—trickster!" Mrs. Kalvak's voice rose in anger. "That was Stefan on the phone."

"He's coming back, then?"

"Sooner than you like, my fine deaf lady!"

"Wait!"

"You're no country innocent, Miss Yulett. I know who you are. You're a detective, trying to trap my man. And all the time I was sorry for you, thinking you were caught in his net!"

Helen screamed, once. Teccard heard a thud. He lunged at the panel. "Helen! Get the door open!"

There was no answer.

He pointed the muzzle of Meyer's automatic an inch from the edge of the jamb, at the lock.

Before he could pull the trigger he felt something like the end of a piece of pipe jab painfully into the small of his back. A suave voice murmured: "Use my key! It will be easier."

The lieutenant held the pose. A hand relieved him of the .45.

"Come on, Vanya! Open up!"

The door swung wide. The girl stared, white-faced. "I didn't know you

were out here, Stefan. I heard him trying to get in." She held a heavy, cast-iron skillet at her side.

"I came upstairs while he was belching like a bull." Kalvak prodded Teccard between the shoulder-blades with the automatic. "Get inside, there."

Helen was sprawled on the floor beside the refrigerator. Her hat lay on the floor beside her, the wide brim crushed by the fall. Her head rested on a brown-paper shopping bag.

Kalvak whistled softly. "You killed her, Vanya!"

"She's only stunned." The girl lifted the skillet. "When I found she was a detective, I could have killed her."

"We've enough trouble, without having a cop murder to worry about. Did you search her?"

Vanya kicked the sergeant, sullenly. "There's no gun on her. What are you going to do with them?"

Kalvak snarled at her, "I'll take care of them." He dug a spool of adhesive out of his pocket and swung on the lieutenant. "Sit down on that chair. Grab the back of your hands. Close your eyes."

"Hell! You're not going to tape us, are you?"

"You think I want you to follow us, you bastard?"

Teccard saw a peculiar bulge inside the lining of Miss Yulett's hat.

"If you don't want to fret about a cop murder," he said to Stefan, "you better call a doc for her."

"She'll snap out of it all right."

"Damn it! I tell you she's dying!" Slowly and deliberately, so Kalvak couldn't mistake his intention, Teccard moved a step closer to Helen.

The weapon in Kalvak's hand swiveled around to follow the lieutenant's movement. "Leave her alone."

Teccard rested his weight on one hand, close to the hat brim. The other he put on Helen's forehead. "She's like ice. If you don't get her to a doctor fast—" His hand touched cold metal under the loose lining of the big hat.

Kalvak sensed something wrong. "Keep away from that hat!"

TTECCARD fired without drawing the stubby-bar eled .32 out from under the hat lining where Helen had hidden it.

It was an angle shot and risky as hell, but the lieutenant knew the risk he and Helen were running if he didn't shoot.

The bullet hit Kalvak about three inches below his belt buckle. It doubled him over and spoiled his aim with his own automatic. But the heavy slug ripped across the lieutenant's hip. It felt as if molten metal had been spilled all along the thigh. He lifted the .32, hat and all, and emptied three more chambers.

The first bullet missed its mark. The second one caught Kalvak under the V-cleft in his chin. The third wasn't needed.

Vanya sprang, caught him as he fell. She slumped on the floor, held his head in her arms, whimpering.

Helen struggled to sit up. "You and the U.S. Cavalry, Jerry," she mumbled.

He helped her to stand. "I was a sap to lose you, there in the subway."

Helen pressed her hands on top of her head, winced. "Peter—I mean Harold—or Stefan—gone?"

"Thanks to your hiding that thirty-two in the Yulett dame's bonnet."

Vanya whined wretchedly, "I know you're glad he's dead. I ought to be glad, too. But I'm not, I'm not!"

The lieutenant limped over to her. "It was a good act, while it lasted, Mrs. Kalvak. But it couldn't last forever. You can take off the disguise."

She stopped rocking. "You mean I knew about Stefan's having committed murder? Yes, I knew. When it was too late to prevent them."

"I'll say you knew." He picked up Meyer's pistol. "The one who didn't know—for sure, anyway—was Stefan!"

Helen said, "What?"

The other girl sat there as if stupefied.

"All right," said Teccard. "Okay. See what that innocent stuff gets you after Patrolman Taylor identifies you as the woman who ran downstairs at Eighty-eighth Street to tell him there was a fight going on in the room above yours. Why'd you chase over there after your husband, anyway? Because you'd read that story in the newspaper about the kid finding the Lansing girl's bones?"

"That'd be my guess. You were up there in the room Stefan had rented as Harold Willard, so he could get his hooks

into another dame,"—he waved ironically toward Helen—"and you were packing up the clothes he had in the closet, or maybe just arguing with him so he wouldn't think you knew too much about those bones under the pier. Then who should ride up on his charger but T. Chauncey Helbourne. When he heard about the disappearing dames and the dough that vanished along with them, he wanted a cut of that, too. And he went to the right place to get it."

Vanya laid her cheek against the bloodless one in her lap. "You do not really believe such horrible things. No one could believe them."

Helen was at the sink, using cold water. She held up a small camp hatchet. "Could it be this Boy Scout meat ax? It's been scoured with steel wool."

"The head of it would fit the gash in my fedora just ducky," Teccard answered. "But Helbourne was shot after I'd had my light put out. You shot him, Mrs. Kalvak, so I'd either get blamed for bumping him myself or think Helbourne was the rat responsible for the Happiness murders."

"I was there at Eighty-eighth Street." Vanya stroked the corpse's forehead. "I did hear the fight. I told the truth to the policeman. You shot that man."

"No cop shoots a man when he's lying down, lady. The blood-stain on Helbourne's vest was round, with the bullet-hole in the center. If he'd died on his feet, the way it would have been if he was shot in a fight, the blood-stain would have been tear-shaped, with the point down. How'd you beat it out of the house? Rush your husband down to that bathroom on the second floor, have him wait there while you murdered Helbourne without Stefan's knowing it?"

SERGEANT DIXON went over to pick up what was left of Miss Yulett's hat. She picked up the brown-paper market basket at the same time. "Don't tell me this girl cut up that Lansing woman all by herself, Jerry!"

"Yair. With her little hatchet."

"But why?" The sergeant held the bottom of the market bag up to the light. "If Stefan got the money out of these women, with his honeyed words—"

"Stefan wheedled it out of them, and

turned the cash over to Mrs. Kalvak. She wouldn't mind her husband monkeying with other femmes, if it paid enough."

Vanya kissed the corpse on the lips. "Darling! Listen to the hideous lies they make up about me!"

"Talk about lies, Mrs. Kalvak! You must have lied plenty to your husband. You'd probably promised to get the love-lorn out of his way after he'd garnered in the gold." Teccard turned his back to inspect the wound on his hip. "Maybe he thought you scared them off by that 'he's-a-married-man—I'm-his-wife' line. I don't know. But I'm damned certain you thought the easy way to keep the suckers quiet was to plant them. Why you had to hack them to pieces—"

Helen held up the market bag by its brown-twine handle. "Recognize those brown fibers that clung to the oil-cloth, Jerry? From this twine. Goes through the bottom of the bag to give it strength. She used this to carry—them—in."

"Yair. Yair. That's why she had to ax them in small hunks. So she could carry the pieces out of here and down to the wharf without being conspicuous!" He went over, hauled the girl to her feet. "Or maybe it's you just like cutting up people. Like Agousti."

Vanya touched the wound in Stefan's neck, as if she couldn't believe her eyes. "Stefan went to—see Agousti. I know nothing of that."

"Don't, eh? Then it won't be your prints on that stem-cutter or the door-knob downstairs, eh? You didn't decide Agousti'd have to be shut up before he prevented your getaway, then?"

Mrs. Kalvak looked up at him. There was murder in her eyes.

Helen hurried to the front room. "I'm going to call the wrecking crew to take over here."

"I've had all of this I want," Teccard agreed. "And I'll sure be glad when you don't have to muck around in this kind of slop, Helen."

"Man works from sun to sun"—the sergeant twiddled the dial—"but woman's work is never done. In the Police Department."

"Far as that goes"—he got out his twisters—"one cop is enough in any one family. Don't you think?" ● ● ●

SPECIAL PERFORMANCE

By
REX SHERRICK

Bill Horton needs all his acting ability when he's mistaken for a jewel thief!

BILL HORTON is my name—juvenile leads. Probably in the old days, my ad in the theatrical papers would have said, among other things, "Snappy dresser on and off." I must unblushingly admit that I am usually tastefully clad in a bunch of threads that are really sharp. Which means I have my clothes made by a tailor who knows how to fit a drape shape to a big ape.

The show in which I had been playing had closed after a long run. It was early summer and there wasn't much casting being done, so I was at liberty. I was living at a hotel in the Forties and I drifted into a bar one night and struck up a drinking acquaintance with Melvin Cardwell. Cardwell was a character and he worked awfully hard at it.

When I drifted into the bar it was an off hour. There was no one there but the bartender, and the red-faced white-haired fat man with the sympathetic expression. They both ignored me as I seated myself on a stool.

"That's the way it is, Mr. Cardwell," the bartender said tearfully. "My wife just doesn't understand me. When I get home after working here late, what happens? She starts right in giving me a lot of yatty-yat about wasting my time being on the make for some babe young enough to be my granddaughter. It's enough to drive a man to drink."

"You would be flattered, Len," Card-



"Wait a minute, Martha! I pleaded. "Don't shoot"

well said. "Her attitude proves that Mrs. Wallace is quite convinced that you are unusually fascinating to women in general and younger women in particular. I should say that she is wildly jealous of you."

"Gosh, you sure know all the answers, Mr. Cardwell," said the bartender suddenly looking very pleased with himself. "Maybe that's it. I never thought of the wife being jealous."

I hesitated to shatter the blissful silence in which Lem Wallace indulged, but after all I was thirsty.

"Scotch and soda, please," I said, deliberately projecting my voice.

Wallace and Cardwell both jumped and then looked at me. When I project my voice you can hear it in the back row of the balcony. The bartender and the customer had no difficulty in hearing me.

"Yes, sir," said Wallace. "Coming right up."

CARDWELL was still staring at me. There was something about his blue eyes that reminded me of marbles. The bartender put the drink in front of me. I poured the little tumbler of Scotch into the big glass containing the ice and then poured the soda in and stirred the whole thing up with a swizzle stick. Cardwell was still staring.

"Doubtlessly you have seen me some place before," I said and then took a sip of my drink. "My name is Bill Horton."

"Of course," said Cardwell. "I knew I had seen you before, Mr. Horton. You played the juvenile in 'The Limping Leopard.' Fine show—and your performance was excellent."

"Thanks," I said, watching the couple who had just entered the bar.

The man had one of those sharp faces that might have been used for a model in a hatchet factory, and looked like he could step right on stage and play a gangster part without makeup. The girl was something else again—she was tall, she was dark haired, she was lovely. She wore a neat fitting dress, a loose tan box coat and a small leopard skin hat. She looked unhappy and I was afraid it wasn't because she didn't know me.

"Yes, I was sorry to learn that the show had closed, Mr. Horton," Cardwell said. He appeared to have a one-track

mind on which he ran the same train for hours. "I saw it six times, and enjoyed the last performance as much as the first."

The girl and the thin-faced man seated themselves at a table over in a corner of the bar. I wanted to rush over and ask her if she didn't remember me—her long lost love from Pago Pago—but what would I do if she just said no! I also had a feeling that the gangster type wouldn't like it.

"Remember the scene in the first act where you first meet the jungle goddess?" Cardwell asked me.

Since I had played the scene for nearly two hundred performances I remembered it all right, but he didn't give me a chance to say so. He just went on raving about the show and telling me in detail how much he enjoyed every scene in it. I made what I thought were the right noises at the right places and started working on a second Scotch and soda. Melvin Cardwell was also taking care of his share of the drinks.

"See that couple over there," Cardwell finally said softly, leaving a loud rave of the third act of the show hanging in mid-air. "That's Martha Greening and Riley Light."

"Martha Greening?" I said. "You mean the girl who inherited a million-dollar diamond necklace from an uncle in Africa or some place like that? Seems to me that I read about it in the paper a few days ago."

"That's right," said Cardwell. "She's an orphan—works as a model for some of the big modeling agencies here in town. The uncle also left her twenty thousand in cash, so she is doing all right."

"Too bad," I said sadly. "And I swore I would never marry a rich woman."

I smiled at the confused expression on Cardwell's face. I let it go at that. That was my story, and he was stuck with it. Then a thought struck me and I frowned. "Just where does Riley Light fit into the picture?" I asked.

"That's what I'm wondering," said Cardwell. "What does he look like to you?"

"A man who would know what to do with a million-dollar diamond necklace if he got hold of it," I said.

"Exactly," said Cardwell. "I know him, and he has a reputation as a crook though no one has been able to prove it on him as yet. Likes to be considered important people, and is usually seen in the night spots with some pretty girl. He knows a lot of models. It probably wasn't hard for him to get one of those other girls to introduce him to Martha Greening."

Martha and Light had been having cocktails at the table. A waiter had appeared from somewhere and was serving them. People were beginning to drift into the bar. I felt like trying to find some way to be the brave and handsome hero even if it was type casting, but I didn't get any bright ideas.

"We've got to find some way to get Martha away from that man," Cardwell said, and I decided he was pretty good at mind reading. "Listen, Bill, I've got a hunch."

"The last hunch I played came in fifth at Jamaica," I said. "But go ahead."

"Martha acts like she isn't really enjoying being with Light any too much," Cardwell said. "Suppose you walk over there, speak to her and pretend you are an old friend."

"Oh, sure," I said. "An old friend who suddenly recognized her after sitting here watching her for nearly half an hour. That will go over big."

"Strange that you should mention horse racing, as you did a moment ago," Cardwell said. "That's my business. I'm a bookie. Light frequently places bets with me."

HE just finished saying it when the hatchet-faced man rose from the table and walked over to the bar, leaving Martha sitting alone.

"Want to talk to you, Mel," Light said to Cardwell. "Privately."

"All right," Cardwell got down off the stool.

I watched the two men walk toward the entrance door of the bar and step outside into the street; then I could no longer see them. I finished off my third drink, paid the bartender and then strolled over to Martha Greening's table. I was trying to think of the right thing to say but she beat me to it.

"You're Bill Horton, the actor, aren't

you?" she said with a smile. "Do sit down."

"Thanks," I said dazedly dropping into a chair at the table. "You're right—I'm Bill Horton—and you're Martha Greening."

"I saw you in 'The Limping Leopard' when it first opened," Martha said. "And the part didn't suit you at all."

I blinked and got annoyed. Stab an actor in his vanity and you'll draw greasepaint every time. That part just suited me—why even the critics said so! I decided that I would do something that would startle this lovely but very brash young lady.

"Listen, Martha," I said. "Will you marry me?"

"Of course," Martha said calmly. "I decided that I would if you ever asked me when I saw you in the show, Bill."

I stared at her unable to believe my ears. Even if I had had three drinks I wasn't tight, and yet I kept imagining that I had asked Martha Greening to marry me the first time I had ever spoken to her and she had accepted.

"Maybe you didn't hear me," I said. "I asked you to marry me, I think."

"You did—and I said that I would marry you," Martha opened her purse and looked inside. "Naturally you don't expect me to let you kiss me here in front of all these people." She gave me a strange look as she snapped her purse shut. "Suppose we go to my apartment and discuss the plans for the wedding."

"Let's not be hasty about this," I said. "Light won't like it if you leave without him. After all, he brought you here."

"Don't worry about that," said Martha. "Light isn't coming back—I'm sure of it. And neither is that stout red-faced friend of yours. They got what they wanted—they think."

"Got what they wanted?" I repeated. "You mean that you have been carrying a million-dollar diamond necklace around with you?"

"It wasn't worth any million," Martha said. "That was just newspaper talk. It was only worth a hundred thousand."

"And Light got it?" I asked.

"That's right—he got the necklace from my purse," Martha said. "Reached into the bag and grabbed it when he thought I wasn't looking." She rose to

her feet. "Shall we go now, Bill?"

I paid the check the waiter had left on the table for Martha's and Light's drinks. We left the saloon and got into a taxi out on the street. Martha gave the address of her apartment over on the East Side. For a girl who had just had a hundred-thousand-dollar necklace stolen, she certainly was taking it calmly.

"I just said the part in the show didn't fit you to see what you would do, Bill," she said. "You were perfect in it. Though I must say I don't like your latest role half as well."

I didn't quite get what she meant by that, and I didn't like the way she said it. It sounded like she was sorry about something and I didn't know what.

The taxi stopped at her address. It was one of the old houses near the East River that had been converted into apartments. I paid the driver and we went up to her apartment. There was a half packed suitcase on a chair in the living room. Martha had switched on the lights. She turned to me, and I discovered she was covering me with a small automatic in her right hand.

"I'm sorry to find out that you are part of the gang who have been after my necklace, Bill Horton," she said. "Rather a cheap part for such a good actor as you are to play."

"Wait a minute, Martha," I protested. "I never saw either Light or Cardwell before in my life until I happened to wander into that bar tonight. Never saw you before either. If those two stole the necklace, I certainly haven't been working with them."

"Smart trick making me believe you were carrying the necklace around with you," said a hard voice from behind Martha—and Light appeared in the doorway leading to another room. "Didn't discover it was a cheap duplicate of the real diamonds until Cardwell and I examined the necklace after we left the bar."

MARTHA swung around. Light lunged at her before she could use the automatic, caught her arm and twisted it. The gun went flying to the floor. I grabbed it up as Light struggled with Martha.

"Let her go, or I'll kill you," I said, aiming the automatic at him, and I meant it.

He released Martha and stepped back. He thrust his hand into the side pocket of his coat. A bullet missed me by inches as he fired the gun that he had inside his pocket. Instantly I pressed the trigger of the automatic in my pocket. The automatic roared, and Light reeled back, a bullet in his shoulder. He dropped his gun, and that was quite all right with me.

"Busy little bee, aren't you, Horton," said Cardwell's voice from behind me. "When you get a gun in your hand, you start shooting people."

I glanced over my shoulder. The stout gray haired man was leaning against the side of the open door leading into the living room. He wasn't holding a gun as I had thought he might be. He smiled pleasantly as he caught my glance. I turned just in time to see Light reaching toward his gun on the floor with his left hand.

"Try it and I'll put a bullet in your other shoulder," I said.

Light lost all interest in the gun on the floor. Martha sank weakly into a chair.

"Nice work, Bill," Cardwell said, walking around in front of me but being careful not to get between me and Light. "The police have been anxious to get something on Light, and this necklace stealing business will do nicely."

"The police," I said, staring at Cardwell. "What do you mean?"

"That I'm Detective Sergeant Cardwell," he said. "When I learned that Light had started dating Martha, I tipped her off that he was after her necklace, and she agreed to play along with me." Cardwell smiled. "You don't think they just happened to drop into that bar where I just happened to be waiting, do you?"

"But you said you were a bookie," I said. "That Light sometimes placed bets with you. He acted as if he knew you well."

"He thought he did," said Cardwell. "That's the way I wanted it." He laughed. "I think you must admit that I'm a fairly good actor!"

"Good—you're perfect." I said, and

then I glanced at the girl. "And so is Martha."

Cardwell made a phone call. More police arrived and took Riley Light away. The sergeant went with them, taking Martha's imitation necklace along with him, and telling her it would probably be used as evidence at Light's trial. I found myself alone with Martha.

"Seems to me we came to to discuss a wedding," I said. "Or was that also just acting?"

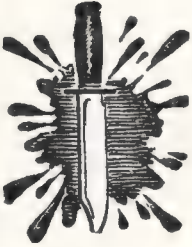
"Suppose you ask me that again in a few weeks when I know you better, Bill," Martha said.

Time flies when you are in love. Seems to me that I had a line like that in some show and I thought it was very corny, but now I'm not so sure of it. Oh, sure I married Martha and we are very happy, but sometimes I get to wondering a little. After all my wife is better at acting than I am and she isn't even on the stage.

• • •

DO YOU KNOW YOUR COPS?

A Quiz by Joseph C. Stacey



Listed below, in jumbled fashion, are eleven famous and infamous police organizations (military, federal, state, private, etc.) and the countries in which they are located. See if you can match up at least 11 correctly for a passing score; 9-10 is good; 11 excellent.

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1. FBI | (a) Hungary (<i>secret police</i>) |
| 2. RCMP | (b) United States (<i>state—i. e., Texas</i>) |
| 3. SCOTLAND YARD | (c) Germany |
| 4. OGPU | (d) United States (<i>private</i>) |
| 5. SURETÉ | (e) United States (<i>federal</i>) |
| 6. CARABINIERI | (f) England |
| 7. GESTAPO | (g) France |
| 8. G-2 | (h) Canada |
| 9. RANGERS | (i) Russia (<i>secret police</i>) |
| 10. PINKERTONS | (j) United States (<i>military</i>) |
| 11. AVO | (k) Italy |

ANSWERS

1-e, 2-h, 3-f, 4-i, 5-g, 6-k, 7-c, 8-j, 9-b, 10-d, 11-a



the CRYPTOGRAM CORNER

by Simon Cipher

THOUGH it may take years of study to become expert in the solution of codes such as are used by the military, almost anyone can become quickly adept at cracking the relatively simple codes commonly used by criminals.

Police investigators, with a background in solving ciphers, have found their knowledge invaluable. Apparently meaningless jottings and figures that might be dismissed by less well informed officers are by careful study revealed as information cleverly concealed by the criminal. Unintelligible numerals inscribed in a thief's confidential memo book may yield the name and address of a fence. A superficially innocent scrawl on the back of an envelope dropped by a bank robber may in actuality be the name of a narcotics pusher—or of other members of his gang.

However, such information is likely to slip through an investigator's fingers if he is not sufficiently trained to recognize a code when he

sees one and to know what to do about it.

Codes are solved in much the same manner as a murder mystery—by tracking down clues, playing hunches, and using ordinary common sense.

Codes or cryptograms can be solved by simple trial and error substitution. More scientifically, they are solved by observing the frequency with which each code letter occurs.

The letter E is by far the most frequently occurring letter in the alphabet. So, for example, if the letter X has been substituted for E in the code, you'll probably find it occurring more than any other letter. Also frequent are the letters T, A, O, N, I, S, H, R, in that order.

Count the number of times each code letter occurs. The most frequent letter will probably be E, the next T, etc. Watch for words that might be THE, or IN, AT, ON, OF. Play your hunches and use your ingenuity.

A Limerick for Beginners

ABCD C EFG F HIJKL EINFK KFCNM ODQLBA,
EBIGC GRCCM EFG NJSB TFGACD ABFK UQLBA
GBC GCA IJA IKC MFH
QK F DCUFAQWC EFH
FKM DCAJDKCM IK ABC RDCWQIJG KQLBA.

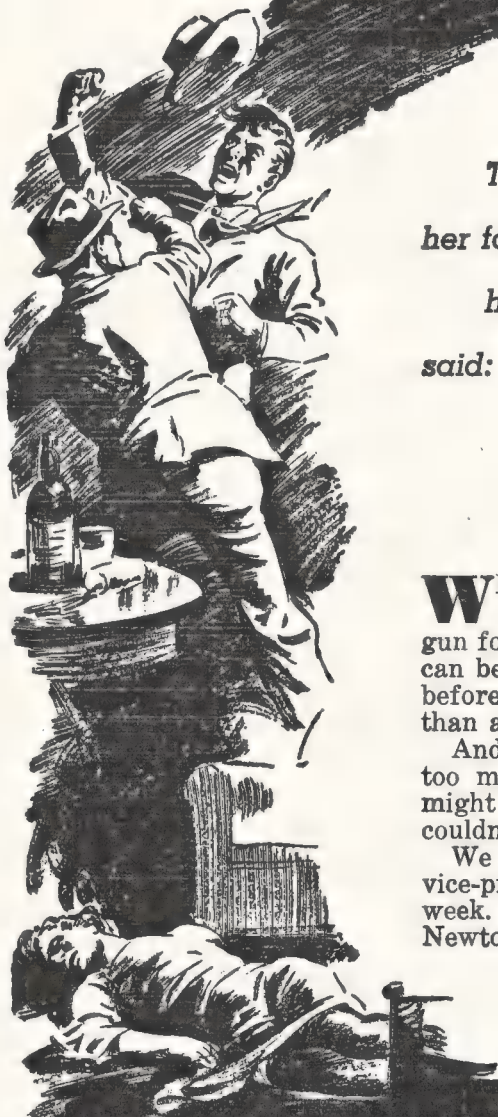
Clues:

1. Start with the one-letter word.
2. Find the letter "E" through frequency.
3. The letter "S" appears as initial or final six times.
4. The combination "AB" appears in different words three times and in reverse "BA" three times.

I'm Always Chasing Them

RMDXPFC LDPFHWNX, ZWZKTDL ZDXGPYV YDFE TPOV,
RWFXYVX XGDYPFD KXDHTV RWFGLDLPNPXV.

On page 129 you will find the answers and an explanation of how they were derived.



*There was blood all over
her face, and the upper half of her
head was crushed. Someone
said: "What did you hit her with?"*

Chapter I

WE'D been married for six years, and apart for four of them while I was handling a gun for my country, and I suppose what happened can be traced to that. We'd had less than a year before I went into the Service, and a little more than a year since I'd been discharged.

And we had no children. Perhaps, too, we had too much—well, call it ambition, though greed might be a better word. But, as Ruth said, if we couldn't make it now, when could we?

We were making it. Ruth was a secretary to the vice-president at Alcuna, at seventy-five every week. I was working a six-to-midnight shift at Newton Press, and writing features at home the

The LONG



NIGHT

A Novel by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

rest of the night.

I'd get home about twelve-thirty, pound the typewriter until five-thirty, and then hit the hay. I was selling about three-quarters of my production, and beginning to get a few fiction sales, too.

It made a long night, working like that. I left for work about twenty minutes after Ruth got home after work. She would be sleeping when I was pounding the machine. And in the morning, I never even saw her take off for the office.

It made a long, lonely night, but we were banking plenty, and that was some compensation. Or so I thought at the time.

I was working a six-day week, but we had our Sundays. Most of them we spent out at the Grove, watching our house take shape. It was taking shape more slowly than we'd hoped or expected. It was being built by a small-time contractor and he simply couldn't get the materials.

First it was soil pipe and then BX cable and then plaster board. I pulled what wires I could, and so did Ruth, through the firm, and we got past these obstacles all right. Though not without some strain on our patience.

Ruth got pretty discouraged about it. She said, one Sunday morning, "Let's not go out to the house, today, Greg. We just build ourselves up to a big let-down, every week."

SHE looked tired. She had the kind of delicate blond beauty that's ravished by fatigue, and she was looking washed-out.

"A day in the country is just what you need, honey," I told her. "We'll ignore the house and plan the garden."

She said wearily, "I can't think of anything I'll ever need less than a day in the country. Lord knows there'll be enough of them, after the house is done."

There was an edge to her voice. There was a petulance in her face that made me believe it wasn't only her weariness talking.

I said easily, "Want to sell it? We could probably get our money back, and more."

She regarded me questioningly. "Do you? There was a quality in her voice

that disturbed me, as though she was hoping I'd been serious.

"Of course not," I said. "And you know you won't, either, after you feel better. It's just been so discouraging."

Her smile was purely muscular. "Oh, Greg! You believe just what you want to believe, don't you?"

"No," I said. "I don't get you, Ruth. You were just as enthused about the house as I was at first."

"Because you were," she corrected me. "Because you'd spent four years living out of a barracks bag and worse, and I thought you had a home coming to you, a home in the country." Her voice was more than petulant now; it was acid. "I thought I could take it, then. I was still full of that patriotic fever. But I know now that it would bore me to death."

I didn't say anything for seconds, because I couldn't. Finally, I said, "I'll see about selling it. I'll talk to the contractor tomorrow."

And I stared at her, across the breakfast table, hating her for the first time in my life, wanting to reach over and slap her.

"Suit yourself," she said. Her voice was flat with unconcern.

I went out a few minutes later. The silence in the apartment was heavy. I felt futile and restless. I thought back, for the first time, to the four-year separation, to the doubts and suspicions so many servicemen had borne. I hadn't been immune.

I didn't really know her, not like a man should know his wife. I had never seen this side of her—until today.

I had no particular place in mind to go when I left the apartment. I'd just wanted to get out. I walked up to Prospect, and down to Kane. Out in front of his cottage, Joe Butler was watering his lawn.

He looked up as I approached, and grinned at me. "Such a nice day, and such a sour face. Typewriter stuck?"

Joe had been on the Police Force a few years. He wrote true detective stories now. He was a big lug, about my own age, an easy-going gent, and a bachelor.

I went into the yard, and sat down on his front steps. "The typewriter's okay," I said. "Just had my first marital battle. It's an unusual experience."

He turned off the hose. "I'll get us a couple cans of beer," he said.

He went past me into the house, and in a few moments he was back. He handed me a can of beer, and said, "Nothing serious, I hope."

"Only that Ruth doesn't want to live in the country. After all the sweating I've done to get that house as far along as it is, she tells me she'd be bored to death out there."

Joe shook his head. "Women," he said. "Maybe she's just fed up with all the delay."

"No. No, she was very definite about it. It was my idea all along, and she didn't want to say anything before this. It's a hell of a time to speak up, if you ask me."

Joe's eyes were thoughtful. "Well," he said, "you won't lose any money on the place, the way costs are rising."

"You think I should sell it? You think I should give in?"

HE SHRUGGED. "I couldn't decide that for you, Greg. Isn't that what you planned?"

"Frankly, yes. That's what I told Ruth, too. I just wondered if it's the logical thing to do."

Joe's smile was wry. "For a married man, speaking as a confidant of many married men, that's the logical thing to do." He put a hand on my shoulder. "There'll be other houses, Greg. And at better prices. Now's the time to salt your dough."

"I suppose," I said. "Only it's been my—oh, dream, I suppose. She really belted me when I found out how she felt."

"How's the writing going?" he asked.

"Fair enough. And you?"

"Peddled two this week. That'll keep me a couple months."

"A writer should be single," I said. "Go where he damn pleases, eat beans, if he has to, work full time."

"That's dangerous talk," Joe said. "Why don't you phone Ruth, and tell her to come over? I'll cook a couple steaks in the back yard, and you two can bury the hatchet."

"Nix," I said.

"Don't sulk," he told me. "It's bad for your artistic temperament. C'mon,

you're a big boy, now."

I shook my head. "It wasn't *only* the things she said, Joe, it was the way *she* said them. Golly, she was so—callous, as though I was some nit-wit she'd been tolerating too long. It's more than the house; it's her whole attitude."

His voice was grave now. "Look, Greg, you're not going to find many like Ruth. Don't blow this thing into a major crisis just because you had your heart wrapped up in that house. She's been working hard, remember, and the way you've been living hasn't been too satisfactory."

There wasn't anything I could tell him, no way I could explain about the sharpness of her voice, the nastiness in it. I said, "I'm not going to call her. Not feeling the way I do now."

He looked like he was ready to protest some more, but he evidently changed his mind.

We talked about markets for a while, and some cases Joe had sold, about the next meeting of the club. He said, "You're almost ready to try it full time. Why don't you take the jump?"

"Not with Ruth making seventy-five fish a week," I answered. "I'd feel like Gigolo George."

"She could quit," he said.

"She wouldn't. She likes nice clothes, and she wouldn't get them on my money, not at first."

"Maybe not," he agreed, "but you can't go on like this. You'll wind up in the bughouse." He got up, and went into the house.

When he came back, he had a couple more cans of beer. We drank those without much dialogue, watching the traffic move by. I left soon after that.

When I got back to the apartment, Ruth wasn't there. She'd left a note:

Greg:

Mr. Allingham had some reports that he wanted checked today. I probably won't be home until tonight.

She hadn't bothered to sign it, nor add the usual "love." Which meant her mood hadn't changed. Nor had mine. A faint suspicion grew in me, and I considered phoning Allingham to confirm the note. This was too coincidental. I leave the house in a peeve and she gets a call from the boss.

I didn't call him. I settled down with a bottle of rye and the Sunday paper. By four-o'clock, I'd read the paper right through to the personals, and the rye was gone.

The apartment was quiet with that blue Sunday quiet. I could just hear the ball game on the radio next door, and the hum of traffic up on Prospect. I sat there feeling sorry for myself, my mind going back over the four-year separation, building up a grievance.

THE month she hadn't written. The letters I'd had telling of this spot and that she'd visited. All in fun, of course, these dates, strictly business. The gents who'd phoned, the first week I was home, and had quit since. The nights, in the past year, I'd smelled liquor in the house when I came home.

It was a combination of these memories and the morning's disappointment and the day's dullness that worked me into a stew. Anyway, it was a good excuse.

At five, I went out to eat, and wound up in a bar. At seven, I was in another bar, in a tougher section of town, and spoiling for a fight.

I found it.

I'm not sure of the details, but the guy had a lot of left hand and a flat nose, I remember. I also remember landing on the nose, and once on the jaw. The button shot was a right hand, and I had my weight in it. It just bounced off of him.

Then somebody pulled the floor out from under me.

Chapter II

WHEN I came to, the flat nose was still in my line of vision. There were a couple of washed-out blue eyes above it, and above the eyes there was a wisp or two of fine hair on an otherwise bald head.

"You want some more, eh?" I said, and tried to get up.

He grinned at me, and one big paw pinned my shoulder. "Easy, Mac. I used to do this for a living. You don't want to tangle with me."

He was right; I didn't. I shook my head gingerly, and looked around. I

seemed to be in some kind of storeroom, behind the barroom, on a cot. Baldy had a cold, wet towel on my forehead.

"What the hell were we fighting about?" I asked him.

"Something deep," he said. "I think it was the United Nations. You were sure stewed."

"I still am," I told him. "We behind the barroom?"

He nodded. "Think you can navigate?"

"I can try," I said, and sat up slowly. The ball bearings in my brain rolled toward the front of my skull, and I waited a moment for them to come to rest there.

Then I swung my feet off the cot.

Baldy said, "Let's go out the back door. This is a crummy joint, anyway." He grinned slyly. "Besides, we'll have to pay if we go out through the bar."

I handed him a ten. "Pay him, first, and we'll go out the back. I don't want the guys in front to see how bad I must look."

Light glimmered in the pale eyes. "You got some more like that, Mac?" he asked me.

"A few."

"The night's a pup," he said, "unless you don't feel up to it."

"A little fresh air, and I'll be ready," I assured him. "Go and pay that bartender."

He went through the door, and I got to my feet. My legs were all right. The buzzing in my head was annoying, but my legs were sound, and that's my barometer on a binge.

Baldy came back with the change, and we went out past some cases of bottled beer, through a narrow door that led into an alley. I didn't know Baldy from a load of hay, and if he wanted my money, this could have been his chance. He led the way out of the alley.

The air was damp and fresh, and I filled my lungs with it. My stomach settled, but my head was still full of marbles. I could see everything; the memory of the alley and the street is still vivid. I just couldn't think.

That's the way it went the rest of the night. We hit some high spots and some low, and my vision remained clear, my legs sound. But my brain wouldn't mesh.

I didn't know a street or even what general locality we were in at any time.

We were in a cheap rooming house room, toward morning, drinking out of a bottle. It must have been Baldy's room. I said, "It won't work, chum. I can't get drunk, no matter how much I drink. I may as well go home."

"Sure," he said. "I'll call you a cab." Then he frowned. "Hey, we got any money left?"

We had twelve cents left, it developed.

"Don't give it a thought," Baldy said. "I'll take care of everything."

About three minutes after that, I was being transported home in a Chev that was at least twenty years old, and maybe more. It was a friend's car, Baldy explained, and the friend was asleep.

We traveled past a tannery, I remember, and a box factory. It was light out now, but there wasn't much traffic. We made time in that puddle jumper.

Then we were in front of my apartment, and Baldy was holding the door open for me. "Here you are, sir. This it?"

"Check," I said, and held out my hand. "It's been a fine evening. I'll see you again, chum."

"Sure, I'll be seeing you around," he agreed. "Don't lead with your chin, next time."

A wave, and he was clattering off down the street.

ONE flight up. There's an elevator, self service, but that was too complicated for me now. I went up the stairs slowly, and down the hall to my apartment.

I thought I heard a footstep inside the apartment, and I had visions of Ruth waiting up for me. I opened the door slowly, and threw in my hat.

No response, and I pushed the door open all the way.

My hat was in the center of the living room rug. Slightly to the right of it, Ruth was lying, face up.

There was blood all over her face, and the upper half of her forehead was crushed, and thick with blood.

For the second time that night, I passed out.

When I came to, there was a face looking into mine again, but it wasn't Bal-

dy's. It was a small, thin face with sharp black eyes.

A voice somewhere to the right and behind the face said, "He coming to, Doc?"

The small face turned away from me. "Right. He smells like a distillery. Probably came home in a drunken rage and—"

The other voice said, "That's my department, Doc. You're too fast with a conclusion."

"Which makes it another of this city's unsolved cases," the doctor said, and his small face went away. And I saw, too, then, that Ruth's body had been taken away—while I was out.

The face that replaced the small one was a lot bigger, and heavier. It was the cynical, hard face of a detective, I felt sure.

"Sergeant Waldorf, out of Homicide," he said. "Think you can sit up, all right?"

I was on the davenport. I sat up slowly, my stomach on the feather edge of the heavens.

"Your name?"

"Gregory Justice," I said. "I live here. The woman on the floor was my wife."

"What'd you hit her with?"

I just stared at him, while the blood pounded through my brain.

He returned the stare, neither concern nor malice on his face. "Don't you want to talk?"

"I came home, and found her like that," I said. "I'd been drinking all night, and when I saw her, I passed out."

The sergeant's eyes covered my face, and then he looked over toward the spot where Ruth had lain. "You were wearing a hat?"

I nodded. "I—thought I heard her moving around in here, so I threw my hat in first, just a gag. I—was drunk."

"You thought your wife was waiting up?"

"That's right." I fought off another attack of nausea, and felt the surge of one I knew I couldn't fight. I got up, and headed for the bathroom.

When I came back into the living room, Sergeant Waldorf was still sitting on the davenport. The little doctor was standing in front of him, talking to him.

I heard the doctor say, "About four hours, though it's hard to be sure yet. I'll know more, later."

The sergeant looked at his watch. "It's after five, now. Let's call it around one, until we can be sure."

The doctor left, and Waldorf indicated the space next to him on the davenport. I sat down.

"What time did you get home?"

"I don't know. It was light out."

"This morning, you mean?"

"That's right. It's been light for only an hour, or so. I couldn't have been out for long." I took a deep breath. "Sergeant, I suppose you have to question me. But couldn't it wait? It's been a—rough night."

He looked down at his hands. "You'll have to understand, Justice, that in a mur—in a case of this kind personal feelings can't interfere. I'm not going to take any more of your time than is absolutely necessary."

THE questioning went on, and I answered as well as I could. The first shock of seeing Ruth, there on the floor, the amount of alcohol I'd consumed had dulled the impact. But as the time grew longer, the fact of her death began to get through to me.

I was a trembling, raw-nerved wreck before Waldorf was through. I couldn't blame him much for hammering at me. I hadn't remembered a single bar nor street to name, and I knew my companion only as Baldy, which was my title for him.

I expected the sergeant to run me in, but he didn't. When he left, he said, "Get some sleep. I'll phone, when I want you down at Headquarters. If you've got a lawyer, it might be in your interest to give him a call."

I didn't take off my clothes. I made the bedroom, and flopped across the bed, fighting my jittery nerves.

There was no sense of loss, not yet. Maybe it was the alcohol; I like to think it was. A man should miss his wife.

I didn't expect to sleep, but I did. It was a sleep full of dreams, and in one of the dreams, I was standing on a platform addressing a crowd, and I was saying, "A writer should be single—"

At eleven, I got up to take a shower, to

shave. After that, some coffee. The apartment was quiet, too damned quiet. I went to the window, and saw the department car parked across the street.

That's why Waldorf hadn't run me in, last night. This had been as safe as jail.

Allingham. I wondered if Waldorf had checked him by now, if he'd learned what time Ruth had left Allingham. And where had they checked the reports? At home or the office? If she'd gone to see him.

I sat around for an hour staring at nothing and thinking of everything, while the shakes came back. Lord, this place was quiet.

I heard the noon whistles, and the increased hum of traffic up on Prospect. At twelve-thirty, I phoned Joe Butler. I asked him, "Have you heard what happened?"

"I have. I'm—shocked, Greg. Waldorf was here, a couple hours ago, and he told me about it."

"He's checking my story."

"That's right. He's a hard worker, Greg. I don't think he ever sleeps."

"He figures me, doesn't he? Did he—tell you anything?"

"He doesn't tell anybody anything. I don't know who he figures, Greg, but he can't overlook any angles." A silence, and then, "I want to see you later. I'll let you know when it's time."

I tried to eat something after that, but couldn't. There was no grief in me. There was a great shame because of the lack of grief. I tried to tell myself I was still under shock, but that was just rationalizing.

We'd grown too far apart, Ruth and I, through the long nights. We'd had only the one common interest, really, and that was the house. She'd destroyed that bond with her scorn, yesterday morning.

At two, Waldorf came. His face was gray with fatigue, his voice was flatly weary. "You've made arrangements for the funeral?"

"No. I—I haven't been—"

He didn't help out with any sign that he understood. He just waited.

"The shock," I said.

"And maybe the alcohol."

I didn't say anything.

"I've checked with Mr. Allingham," he went on. "Your wife left his house at

five-thirty. His chauffeur drove her to the bus terminal at that time."

He got up, went over to stand near one of the windows. "Your memory any better now?" He was looking out the window.

"No."

HE TURNED to face me. "A guy you call Baldy, who used to be a fighter, whose friend has an old Chev, who lives on a route from here that passes a tannery and a box factory. That's your alibi, and that alone. This is one hell of a big town, Justice. You'd better search your mind."

"Alibi?" I said. "I need an alibi?"

He nodded.

"For what time, Sergeant?"

"Eleven to eleven-thirty, last night."

"I was drinking. That much I'll guarantee you. I was with this—fighter. I couldn't tell you where."

He didn't say anything for a moment. Finally he said, "You don't seem near as broken up about this as you ought to be, Justice. You and your wife getting along all right, were you?"

I paused, then said, "Up until yesterday morning. We—well, we didn't quarrel. But I wasn't in a good mood when I left the apartment."

"What'd you quarrel about?"

"It wasn't a quarrel," I said. "It was just her attitude about this house we're having built, out in Elm Grove. I thought she was all for it, but yesterday morning she told me living out there would be too boring for her."

"Life in town here wasn't boring for her, eh?"

I looked up quickly at the tone in his voice. "I don't get you, Sergeant."

"She had a lot of—friends in town, didn't she?"

"Not many, not that I know of." I paused. "What's on your mind, Sergeant?"

"A murder." His gaze met mine. "She lived here most of her life, didn't she?"

"The last twelve years."

"Must have a former boy friend or two around."

I didn't say anything.

"Don't get me wrong," he said. "But it wasn't robbery, and she was wearing a full one-carat diamond. It wasn't any-

thing else. So if it wasn't a boy friend, we come back to where we started."

"To me."

"To you."

"Well, run me in then," I said. "I've told you all I'm able to tell you. There isn't another damned thing I can do for you."

Waldorf studied me for seconds. "Yes, you can," he said then. "You can help me. If you're innocent, Justice, you can help me find the person who was responsible for what happened."

"How?"

"By giving me all the background of your wife's life. By telling me what kind of a crowd she was hanging around with while you were in the Service. I want some names."

"I haven't any," I said. "She'd mention a name in her letters from time to time, but rarely. I didn't keep the letters."

Again, he studied me. And this time he shook his head. "I can't think of a reason in the world why I should believe you. But I do—almost." He rose. "Okay, try to remember what you can. Don't do anything stupid. I'll be back."

I walked with him to the door. There he told me, "And you'd better make some arrangements for the funeral."

He left me, and I went to the phone in the hall. In the classified section, I found a funeral director. I phoned, explained, and hung up.

She had no parents, and I had none. Her friends weren't my friends; my friends scarcely knew her. I went through it all like a man planning a formal dinner, knowing this was no way to feel, shame deep within me, but no grief.

It will come, I thought. I don't realize what's happened yet. I'll miss her, before many days have passed.

Chapter III

IT WAS three o'clock now, and I phoned the shop to tell them I wouldn't be coming in for a few days. I phoned to tell them that, but when I had the boss on the wire, I said, "I won't be back at all any more, Chet. I'm quitting."

A silence. Then he said, "I read the papers, Greg. We're all damned sorry."

If there's anything any of the boys can do, just let us know."

"Thanks, Chet," I said. "I guess there's nothing anybody can do."

I hung up, and went over to look out the window. Today, I'd planned on phoning the realtor, to sell the house. But I wouldn't need to sell it now. I wouldn't be going to work tonight. A writer should be single.

Rotten thoughts, these. I forced my mind back to the prewar years, to the year I'd gone with her, and the year of our marriage before the war, to the dances and the shows, to the nights alone, before the lonely nights.

Ruth, beautiful, delicate, moody, expensive, ambitious. Warm enough for all that. Ruth, now cold and dead.

The quiet of the place seemed to be piling up, like water behind a dam, ready to burst through. The trembling started again in my hands, and I lighted a cigarette.

It was warm out, a humid, breezeless day. It was summer, and the grove behind the house in the country would be softly, coolly green, the oak in the front yard would be shading the door and most of the front lawn. It would be quiet up there, too, but a different kind of quiet.

There was plastering to be done up there, and painting, some plumbing still unfinished. After the funeral I could go live in one of the rooms.

But I knew I wouldn't. I knew I'd stay in town until Ruth's murderer was discovered or until apprehending him seemed hopeless. I'd be doing what Waldorf wanted me to do.

About four-thirty, Joe came over. His face was grave. There seemed to be an embarrassed tension in his manner.

"Anything I can do, Greg?" he asked me.

I thought for a moment, and said, "You can. You can tell me what you know about Ruth's friends, if anything. You were here, during the war. You must have seen her around, from time to time."

His apparent embarrassment increased. "I—didn't think it was any of my business, Greg."

He was looking at me steadily, and there was no mistaking his meaning.

"I can take it," I said.

His eyes still held mine. "A guy named Tony Polcyn," he said then. "I'm not saying there was anything wrong, but Ruth spent a lot of time with him. Maybe she was only working with him. Tony was doing all right, during the war. Nylons and sugar stamps and tires. Just an angle shooter."

"Ruth was working with him on stuff like that?"

He nodded.

"She should have made some money. Of course, she spent a lot. Clothes, and jewelry—"

Joe nodded again. "I—told Waldorf about this Polcyn."

"That's all right," I said. "I remember her mentioning him a couple times. But she said, I think, that he was a friend of Allingham's."

"He is," Joe told me. "I don't think Allingham was mixed up in that stuff, though. He's a pretty solid citizen, Greg."

That he was. One of the town's leading philanthropists, and a civic-minded character. But that wouldn't mean he didn't appreciate a fast dollar.

"I'm going to check those gents," I said. "I want to know about those years."

"I'll do what I can," Joe said. "I'll go along with you, if you wish, Greg." He paused. "Especially if you go up against that Polcyn. He thinks he's pretty rough."

"I'll let you know," I said. "I want to see Allingham, first."

"All right." He rose, and looked at me doubtfully. "I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you this. I never would have if—" He shrugged.

IT WAS nearly five now, and I phoned the Alguna Corporation, and was told that Mr. Allingham had already left for home. He lived out in River Hills, I knew, so I decided to take the car.

It was a new car, and Ruth had finagled it, somehow. I realized, now, that it hadn't been just luck.

The garage was an oven, and the car no better. Once I got on the outer drive, though, the breeze from the lake was cooling. I took my time on the trip, planning my words, trying to remember all that Ruth had told me about Allingham

in her letters, and since.

Alcuna had boomed, during the war. They worked in magnesium and aluminum. I understood from Ruth that they hadn't fared so badly since the war, either. Steel was hard to get, but aluminum was plentiful, and they'd gone into fields where steel had formerly been king.

The Allingham house was new, a ranch type structure of whitewashed brick, huge and informal. A middle-aged maid answered the door.

"My name," I told her, "is Gregory Justice. I'd like to see Mr. Allingham."

"Mr. Allingham is not at home," she said. "If you'll wait, sir, I will find out when he is expected."

When she returned, she said, "Will you come in, sir? Mr. Allingham is expected home shortly."

I followed her into a huge living room, two walls of which were almost entirely window. A third wall was dominated by a low, impressively wide fireplace. The svelte brunette mixing a drink at a liquor cabinet near the fourth wall would be considered the room's point of interest, though.

She was definitely under thirty, and I was surprised when she said, "I'm Mrs. Allingham, Mr. Justice. Can I offer you a drink?"

The memory of the morning's nausea was too fresh. "No, thank you," I said. "I was told, at the company, that Mr. Allingham had left for home, or I wouldn't have bothered him here."

"It's no bother," she said. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Justice?"

I sat in an armless chartreuse chair while she finished mixing a whisky and soda.

When she'd finished, she came over to sit on a circular sofa, nearby. She said, "You were Ruth's husband, Mr. Justice?"

I nodded.

Her dark eyes were quite candidly searching my face. "I can't seem to believe what's happened. She was so cheerful when she left here, yesterday." She sipped her drink. "It's been a terrible shock to both of us."

She sounded like a woman trying to make a point, but I didn't get it. I couldn't think of anything to say.

Mrs. Allingham was showing a lot of interest in her drink. "It's—about what happened? That's why you came to see my husband?"

I nodded. "I thought he might know something he—wouldn't reveal to the police."

She glanced at me sharply. "I'm sure he doesn't. Are you suggesting there was something in their relationship besides business?"

"Not at all," I answered. "I came to see your husband about another man. I wanted some information on a man named Tony Polcyn."

She froze, staring at me stupidly. "Tony? What possible connection could he have with—" She broke off. "I wouldn't talk about Tony Polcyn to my husband, Mr. Justice. It's a taboo subject around here."

"I thought he was a friend of your husband's."

Her chin lifted. "No," she said quietly, "Tony is a friend of mine."

Defiance in her stare, defiance and confession. I said nothing.

Something else in her eyes, now, a pleading. "Please, Mr. Justice, nothing about Tony to my husband."

I heard footsteps on the tile of the entrance hall now and Mrs. Allingham turned that way.

THE man who stood in the entrance to the living room was a fairly thin man, and tall; about fifty. I don't know why I should have expected something different, but I had. This gent was almost too handsome, despite his years.

"My husband, Mr. Justice," Mrs. Allingham said. And to him, "Mr. Justice wanted to talk to you, Roger."

Then, as I rose, she glanced at me abjectly. She feared this man's wrath, it was plain.

Well, what was she to me? Just another erring wife, as they say. But I said, "I wanted to check the time my wife left here. I thought there might be something else you'd be able to tell me."

I glanced at her, and there was gratitude in her eyes.

Roger Allingham's voice was soft, pleasant. "There's nothing I haven't already told the police, Mr. Justice. Believe me, if there was anything I could

say that would help, I wouldn't hesitate. No matter who was involved."

I saw Mrs. Allingham stiffen.

I asked, "Ruth left here around five-thirty?"

He nodded. "Exactly. She usually works until five, you know, and she remarked that she'd put in a half hour of overtime, and it was too bad she wasn't on an hourly basis."

I looked over at Mrs. Allingham and back at him. I said, "I'll be getting along then. I had hoped there'd be something, some lead—"

His face was troubled. "I'm sorry I couldn't help. This has been a terrible shock to me, too, you understand. Ruth was like a daughter to me."

Nobody over fifteen would be like a daughter to him. I said good-by to them both, and left.

I drove down the long gravel drive to the highway and turned south, toward town. All fine homes along here, our Gold Coast. But if what I'd just seen was typical, even money couldn't buy fidelity.

I should have mentioned Polcyn to him. It's all right to be a gentleman, but I had a hunch I'd been a sucker. I could go back to town and look up Tony Polcyn, and get it from his angle. It would have been better, though, to get the relationship from Allingham's angle. His wife could have been lying. Perhaps he really was a friend of her husband's, and she'd been covering.

When I got back to town, I drove over toward the South Side. That was the main manufacturing section. Perhaps if I saw that box factory again, or the tannery, I'd remember the route to Baldy's.

I found the tannery on Vine, and traveled south on Vine, looking for the box factory. Eight blocks down, I found it. I continued on Vine.

Nothing came back to me; it was like a foreign country. I spent the next hour cruising the South Side and didn't recognize a single building besides those two.

It was nearly seven-thirty when I headed for a restaurant. From there, I looked up Polcyn in the telephone directory. There was only one, an Anthony Polcyn with an East Side address for his residence, and a downtown address for

his office.

Then I ate, and for the first time that day I read the paper.

There was a picture of Ruth on the upper half of the front page. There was a picture of me in uniform some reporter must have stolen.

The story under the pictures was headlined:

HUSBAND SEEKS ALIBI IN MYSTERY SLAYING

I hadn't until now, but that was newspaper license, I supposed. The story went on to tell about my intoxicated condition, and Baldy's. An adjective was used every time Ruth's name was mentioned—winsome, blonde, lovely, young. They were really milking the beauty angle.

Allingham, who was Ruth's employer, was mentioned as a prominent philanthropist and civic leader, his wife as a charming member of the North Shore social colony. Polcyn wasn't mentioned at all.

Chapter IV

OUTSIDE, it was dusk. In the restaurant were only a few customers. Loneliness crept into me and grew and grew. My hands started to shake again. I wanted to leave, but I forced myself to finish the meal, to drink two cups of coffee and smoke a cigarette.

When I left, I was under control physically, but the loneliness was as distressing as ever.

I drove over to Polcyn's apartment. There was a car parked in front of the building, an Olds convertible that I knew I'd seen somewhere that day. It was a yellow job, with a black canvas top and white-wall tires.

I had rung Polcyn's bell when I realized where I'd seen the Olds before today. It had been parked near the garage at the Allingham home.

The door buzzed almost immediately, and I went up a wide, carpeted stairs to the second floor. A man stood in an open doorway at the end of the hall up here, waiting for me. He was wearing a dressing gown.

He wasn't too tall, but he was husky enough, broad across the shoulders, and

heavy through the chest. His face was squarish, chiseled, ruggedly handsome. His eyes were a hard black.

"Tony Polcyn?" I asked.

He nodded, his eyes never leaving my face.

"My name's Justice," I said. "Gregory Justice."

"Oh," he said, and his chin lifted a little. "Come in, Justice."

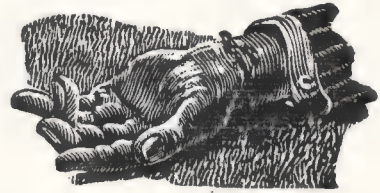
Mrs. Allingham broke in then. "Relax, Tony. Don't flex your muscles. Mr. Justice thought you were a friend of Roger's."

Her smile was ironic.

"You were a friend of Ruth's, too, weren't you?" I asked. "Is there any reason I shouldn't be looking for you?"

"I did some business with your wife. Not recently, however. I haven't even

DEAD, BUT NOT UNKNOWN



WHEN DETECTIVES from Scotland Yard arrived at one of London's swank West End hotels to investigate a death there, they found the body of a man who had every intention of staying dead.

Not only had he taken a strong dose of poison and cut his wrists, but he had filled a bathtub with water and proceeded to drown himself in it.

Since the man had destroyed all clues to his identity, it was correctly assumed that he had registered under a false name; and when the officers attempted to take his prints, they discovered that he had burned the friction ridges from the tips of his fingers with an acid.

The officers were stumped, for here was a man not only determined to remain dead but anonymous as well!

However, the fingerprint experts at the Yard soon solved that problem. Skinning the flesh from the tips of the dead man's fingers, they photographed the friction ridges from underneath the acid-burned skin. All they had to do then was reverse the photo and check their files.

Their efforts paid off, too! The man who had sought death and anonymity was found to have had a long record of convictions for fraud. He was dead, all right, but no longer unknown.

I went into a dim, darkly furnished living room. Mrs. Allingham was sitting on the davenport in there, smoking a cigarette and studying the smoke.

Polcyn said, "I believe you two have met."

"This afternoon," I admitted.

"You went up there to ask about me?"

"For one thing."

"Why?" His voice was a bit higher. I wasn't sure whether he meant it to be threatening, or not. "Why should you go up there to find out about me?"

"Why not?" I looked him over, sizing him up.

seen her for months."

I'd been a gentleman once today, to protect Mrs. Allingham. This time I didn't spare her feelings. "You saw her last week," I told him. "She told me about it, at the time."

He colored, and Mrs. Allingham's eyes narrowed.

He looked at her, and back at me. "I met her on the street. I'd forgotten about that."

The brunette was looking daggers.

Polcyn said, "You have a lot of information, haven't you?"

"Not enough," I said. "What kind of

business was this that concerned Ruth?"

"She furnished me with leads for—things I had to sell. She knew the kind of people who were prepared to pay the kind of prices I asked. She got a commission." His eyes met mine squarely, as though he were taking the Scout oath. "Our relationship was strictly business."

"I wouldn't be standing here if I thought it was anything else," I told him. "You haven't anything to tell me?"

He shook his head. He was looking annoyed. I wondered what he'd be doing if Mrs. Allingham wasn't there. He couldn't afford a fight, because a fight would mean the law.

She said, "Why don't we all have a drink and talk like civilized people?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. All I came for was information. This is my second blind alley for the day."

I STARTED for the door, and Polcyn said, "Does the law think I'm a friend of Roger Allingham's, too?"

"They don't confide in me," I said. "I haven't any idea what they think, excepting that I'm their Number One man, so far."

"You?" His surprise seemed honest. "They think you—"

"I'm their first choice. I was dead drunk, remember."

"Look, Justice," he said, "maybe I went off half-cocked. I'd no idea you were involved like that."

If he read the papers, he couldn't have had any other idea. And he looked like he could read. I wondered about his change of attitude.

I got an inkling of it when he said, "You were a right guy when you kept your mouth shut up at Allingham's today. I'm the kind of gent who remembers a friend. And I've a connection or two. Keep in touch with me."

"Sure," I said. He wasn't going to do me any good, but I had nothing to gain by talking.

I said good night to both of them, and left.

It was dark out, the moon obscured by clouds, a slight, humid breeze blowing in off the lake. I'd spent a fruitless day and there was no place to go but home.

I'd sure met some lemons today.

I wondered where Baldy was. Maybe he was still carrying on. Maybe he'd found another bankroll. Baldy was no prize, but after the characters I'd met today, he looked like a minor god. At least he didn't pretend to be something he wasn't.

I put the car in the garage, and walked the two blocks to the apartment. I took my time. I was in no hurry to get home.

When I got within sight of the building, I hesitated. I could go to a show, or a bar. But I'd have to come home eventually. Later, I'd move to the Grove.

The halls were dim. In my hall, I saw the shadow at the far end the second I turned from the stairs.

I froze right there, as the shadow moved up into the light.

It was Baldy.

He had a thin grin on his battered face. "Mac, you must think I'm some stinker, huh?"

I shook my head. "I've just been thinking the opposite, Baldy. You sober?"

"Yup. It's a hell of a state, ain't it?" He gestured toward my door. "C'mon, let's get inside."

I opened the door, and we went in. The apartment was stifling. I turned on a table lamp and told Baldy, "I haven't a drop in the house. I'm a hell of a host."

He was studying me strangely.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"You don't talk like a man that just lost his wife," he said. His eyes were appraising me, his face grave.

"I don't feel like one," I said. "I don't know what's the matter, Baldy. It just hasn't hit me the way it should."

His eyes continued their appraisal, and then the grin came. "I'm sorry. I should talk. Me, with three divorces. And I don't miss any of them. But I figured you were different, Mac."

"I've been looking for you," I said.

"I'll bet you have." He sat down on the davenport. "You in the clear? You're not in the clink, so you must be clear, huh?"

"I'm not in the clear. But you could put me there."

He nodded. He was chewing his lower lip. "I meant to stay away." He flushed. "I figured you were nothing to me, just a pick-up partner for a binge. But—"

He shook his head.

"Buddies?" I said, and grinned at him, my first for the day.

"I guess. Look, I saw the paper, and I figured to lay low. You see, I got an assault and battery rap hanging over my head, and the law's been looking for me. Maybe only three to six months, but the place is murder for me, Mac." He was sweating, his hands were working. "I sat just once in my life for thirty days, and it almost got me. Hell, I don't know—" He looked up at me. "If you need me, though, I can sit. I'd be glad to sit for you, Mac."

I SAID, "Let's wait. They haven't charged me yet. How about me going out to get a jug?"

He held a big hand out. "No, no. We don't want any liquor until this thing's cleaned up. Waldorf's on it, huh?"

I nodded.

"Good man," Baldy said. "I've been keeping an ear to the ground, figuring there might be a racket angle. I ain't heard a thing." He hesitated, looking at me doubtfully. "Boy friend—maybe?"

"I'd like to think not. You know a Tony Polcyn?"

"Everybody knows Tony. He in this?"

"I'm not sure. He spent a lot of time with my wife when I was in the Service. I went to see him tonight."

Baldy shook his head. "Tony's no killer. Tony's too smart." He stared. "But you never can be sure, right? There's always the first time."

I agreed to that.

Baldy sighed, and studied the carpeting. "You got something to eat in the joint? I'm starving."

"Plenty in the ice box, but I'm not much of a cook," I told him.

"I am," he said. "If I hadn't been so handy with my dukes, I'd have made a big time chef, I'll bet."

We went out to the kitchen, and he fried himself a couple of eggs with bacon. He made some coffee.

He ate without saying much, looking worried and thoughtful, glancing at me from time to time, as though trying to figure me.

When he'd finished eating, I offered him a cigarette, but he shook his head.

[Turn page]

123

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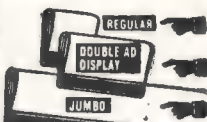
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"Only vice I haven't got. Well, I'll be breezing. If you need me, chum, you can call the Circle Bar and ask—"

"Why don't you stay here?" I interrupted. "There's room."

He looked at me doubtfully.

"Please," I said. "I've got the creeps, Baldy." I paused. "You don't really trust me, do you? You're sober now, and you think differently about me."

He shook his head. "It's not that. I just keep remembering what happened here and— Damn it, Mac, you're so normal. I figured, with a wife like that, you'd be all shot to hell."

"I didn't really know her," I said. "I can't act about it. It simply hasn't hit me yet, like I told you. Maybe it will, later."

"Okay," he said. "But if Waldorf comes nosing around, I'm going to duck."

We hit the hay soon after that.

It was a long night, full of dreams. The times I woke up, I could hear Baldy snoring in the other bed, a welcome, pleasant sound. It was a long night, but not nearly as lonely as the others.

Waldorf came in the morning. Baldy stayed in the bedroom.

Waldorf said, "I'm giving it today, and that's about all for me on it. The D.A. wants some action. I think he'd be satisfied with you, Justice."

"He's worried about his record?"

"You'd have to ask him. Any luck in finding that alibi of yours?"

I didn't even hesitate before saying, "No."

"And you can't remember any of the bars you hit?"

I couldn't, but Baldy would. I said, "I'm getting closer to it, I think. I'm going out to look up some this morning. I've got a hunch."

He looked at me wearily, and shook his head. "You must have been boiled." He went to the door and turned. "You can stop bothering Polcyn. His alibi is gilt-edged."

The door closed behind him.

Chapter V

A FEW seconds later, Baldy came out of the bedroom, and I asked him about the spots we'd visited.

"I don't remember all of them," he said, "but we were in one about three blocks from here. Remember that?"

I didn't, and I said so. I asked, "Around what time was that?"

"Around eleven. Hell, you were in the washroom for about a half-hour. I thought you'd lammed on me."

Three blocks . . . A half hour . . . A writer should be single.

Baldy said, "What's the matter? You sick? What happened?"

"Ruth was killed between eleven and eleven-thirty," I said.

He nodded. "I read that in the papers. Weren't you in the washroom, Greg?"

"I don't remember any washroom," I said.

I knew now why he'd been so doubtful last night.

"But you'd remember a—a murder, chum."

"Would I? I hope so, Baldy."

He looked at his hands. "If you left there, you left by a window, a small, high window. There's no back door in that washroom." He looked up at me. "I checked that, yesterday."

"And still you came here?"

He didn't answer that.

He said, "I'll make breakfast. I'm hungry."

He made pancakes. He fried some pork sausages and made the best coffee I'd ever tasted. But I couldn't eat much. If I'd had a memory lapse—

Baldy was quiet while we washed the dishes. His lumpy face was thoughtful and his pale eyes clouded with concern. As we went back into the living room, he said, "Don't tell Waldorf about that washroom business. He's a good man, but he's only got so much time. It's too easy."

"Did you talk to the bartender?" I asked.

Baldy nodded. "He don't remember a thing. He had one hell of a crowd in there Sunday night."

The phone rang, and I answered it.

It was Roger Allingham. He asked, "Have you a little time this morning? I'd like to talk to you."

I told him I had plenty time.

"I'll stop in then, on the way to the office," he said. "It'll be about fifteen

minutes before I'm in town."

When I hung up, Baldy was watching me. "Something cookin'?"

I shrugged. "I thought I got nowhere last night, but maybe I stirred up something, at that. It's Roger Allingham, Ruth's boss."

"What'd he want?"

"I'll find out in fifteen minutes."

Baldy went back to the bedroom before Allingham came. "You'd think we was being indiscreet," he complained.

It took me some time to find out what Roger Allingham wanted. I didn't really understand what he was after until he'd left.

When he came in, he was tense and nervous. The care he took with his words, you'd think he was looking them up.

"I want to talk about Ruth," he said, "if that's not too callous of me, right now."

"Go ahead," I said.

"She got her job with me through my wife, as you probably know. I'm quite sure I know who introduced her to my wife, a man named Tony Polcyn my wife formerly spent—a lot of time with." He studied me. "Were you in your wife's confidence completely, Mr. Justice?"

I hesitated, then shook my head.

"I didn't think so. You seem like a straightforward young man, and judging men is part of my business. I want to speak frankly, Mr. Justice." He was watching closely for a reaction.

Again I said, "Go ahead."

"Has Ruth ever told you anything about me?"

I began to burn. "Should she have?"

HE STARED, and then he said, "Oh, Lord, not that, man. You don't think—" He shook his head vexedly. "I mean, has she ever told you anything about my past?"

"No. Did she know anything about it?"

"I don't know. She made some remarks lately that led me to think she knew some things I thought were dead." He faced me squarely. "If it were anyone else, I'd assume they were the opening remarks to a diplomatic bit of blackmail." He rose. "Now, hit me if you want to."

[Turn page]

125

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"You're vulnerable to blackmail?" I said.

"Don't you know?"

"I don't."

"Polcyn then." He looked thoughtful. "I wonder if he's still in town."

"He was last night," I said.

He looked at me sharply. "Have you seen him? Is he connected with what happened?"

"I don't know," I said. "I was just looking up some of my wife's—friends."

Allingham looked like a man about to be executed.

"It's pretty bad?" I asked.

"It's good for five years," he said.

"I'm telling you this, because it will probably break, anyway. I've lived in fear too long to pay blackmail now." He shook his head wearily. "I can take it, but my wife—"

I couldn't think of anything both honest and genuinely comforting to say to that.

After he left I was still standing near the door when Baldy came out of the bedroom. He was frowning. "What the hell kind of mess we in, chum? You think that's got anything to do with your wife?"

I shrugged. "I don't know any more than I ever did. I feel like a puppet, being worked with strings. Everybody I've met in this deal has got too many extra-curricular activities."

"English, please," Baldy said. "This Polcyn batting in the Allingham league? Who told you about that?"

"A friend of mine," I said. "And I'm going to call that friend now, to see if he's home. He used to be a cop. I'm going to tell him everything I know about it, and get his reaction."

"A cop," Baldy said. "Isn't one cop enough? If—"

He never finished the sentence. My doorbell rang for the third time that morning, and I went over to press the buzzer.

"Grand Central Station," Baldy grumbled. "You'd think we were playing red light." He went back to the bedroom again.

It was Joe Butler.

"I was just going to phone you, Joe," I said.

He seemed to pause, to study me.

"Trouble?"

"Just information," I said. "Who told you about Polcyn and Mrs. Allingham?"

Again that pause, and I had the damndest feeling he was scared. "Why?"

"I just wondered."

And then I remembered it wasn't Polcyn and Mrs. Allingham he had told me about; it was Polcyn and Mr. Allingham. But he hadn't corrected me, just now, so he knew. He knew, and had said nothing. He had described Roger Allingham as a solid citizen. He had steered me toward Polcyn, but away from Allingham.

Puppets. Joe knew about them; Joe manipulated characters. Polcyn, the red herring, and Joe knew about those, too. And there was something else Joe knew.

I said, "You look tired, Joe. Lot of research?"

Now he was obviously suspicious. "What do you mean? What are you driving at, Greg?"

"Those true detective magazines," I said. "I studied them for a while. Full of old cases, aren't they? Some of them unsolved, complete with pictures of the principles. Have to dig to find any cases that haven't been told about in print before."

H HE DIDN'T say anything. He was staring at me, missing nothing.

"Is that where you saw Allingham's picture?" I asked.

He had no words, and it was as good as a confession to me. For either my words made no sense at all to him, or I was on the right track.

Joe had wanted me to make up with Ruth, yesterday morning. He'd almost insisted. He didn't want her. He must have known she was about ready to dump me, but he didn't want a wife. A writer should be single.

"Did you introduce Ruth to Polcyn?" I asked. "Or just tell her about him? Polcyn could introduce Ruth to Mrs. Allingham and, through her, get the job with Roger Allingham. Ruth could be your stooge, then, and find out just how much Allingham could and would pay. Am I right, Joe?"

"You're crazy," he said, but his voice was shaky.

[Turn page]

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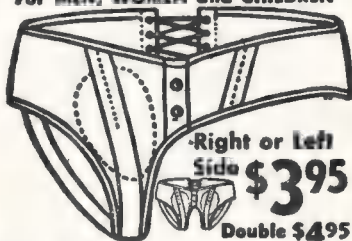
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"Am I? Nobody but you seemed to know about Mrs. Allingham and Polcyn. You didn't tell me before that you knew it. You just slipped now."

"You've been drinking, Greg," he said.

"Not today. Did Ruth want you to marry her? Was she going to ask me for a divorce? Is that why, Joe? Did you promise to marry her, when I was in the Service, and you were here, back-dooring me?"

"You've let your imagination run riot, Greg," he said. "Calm down."

"Imagination?" I said. "Maybe. Most of it." And then I told my lie. "But last night, at eleven o'clock, I was in pretty bad shape. I was at a bar, about three blocks from here, and I had to come home for more money. It's all been blank, until a few minutes ago. But I remember coming here now, and I remember seeing you leave here last night around eleven."

He was white. "You were drunk, Greg. It's a hallucination. You're guessing."

I shook my head. "I remember. And my buddy will, too, if I ever find him."

Silence, while Joe stared at me. Silence, while I thought of how he'd pulled the strings, and we'd played our parts. Leading me and Waldorf to Polcyn. If I hadn't happened to drop in at Joe's Sunday morning, Waldorf would never have even talked to him.

Joe'd been my friend, not Ruth's, I'd thought.

Silence, and then I saw Joe's feet move, as he set himself. I ducked, but he caught me along the jaw anyway, and I crashed into the wall.

I saw a blur in front of me, and I swung, hitting nothing. Then something crashed my temple, and the lights went out.

When I woke up, the flat nose was there again, and the wisp of hair and the faded blue eyes. The grin, too.

"You sure are a sucker for a left," Baldy said. "How you feeling, chum?"

"I'll live," I said. "How about Butler?"

Baldy inclined his head to the left. "Him? He might, and he might not. I saw him smack you, and it kind of burned me, so I worked him over pretty good. He's been babbling like a baby. I

wouldn't be surprised if he'll tell Waldorf everything he wanted to know. . . ."

Joe did. Though Waldorf told me, "Of course, it was only a question of time before I'd have nailed him, anyway. You see, he left the Department under—oh, a cloud, you might say. Nothing we could nail him with, but it smelled of blackmail, and I'd have got the black-mail angle in this, after a while. If you hadn't gone to see him Sunday morning, though, he might never have got into the case."

"Sure," I said. "You'd have got him, Sergeant—or me."

Allingham took his five-year rap like a man. His name had been Revere, when he'd peddled the phony stock, but the picture had led Joe to him.

Baldy never served a day. Waldorf said if there was any charge against him, somebody must have removed it from the files. He couldn't find it.

Baldy and I are living in the country house now, and I don't think I'll marry again. Not unless Baldy's cooking goes sour. . . .

THE CRYPTOGRAM CORNER

(Answers to cryptograms on page 109)

A Limerick for Beginners

There was a young woman named Bright,
Whose speed was much faster than light.

She set out one day

In a relative way

And returned on the previous night.

Limericks invariably fall into a pattern, and this makes their solution relatively easy. For example, in all limericks there are such phrases as:

There was a—
boy, girl, young man, maid, lady
who, whose, name, named, from
of, in, etc.

If there is any doubt about whether the one-letter word is "A" or "I," you can settle the issue by noting how the letter appears in different words.

I'm Always Chasing Them

Chasing rainbows, popular pastime many like,
consumes stamina usable contrariwise.

This crypt, a challenge to those slightly beyond the beginner's status, does require quite a bit of mental exercise to break down.

D, P, and W, indicate they are vowels by their position as second letters in so many words. A likely candidate for the ending "ing" is then PFC. The final positions of X and V suggests "s" and "e." XG, used twice in positions indicating consonants, suggests "st"—a common consonant pair. Also in RWF you have a vowel preceding a frequent consonant—which would likely be "n."

This crypt was by Thomas R. Fisher.



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THE LOWDOWN

(Continued from page 6)

head like angleworms on the bottom of a fisherman's pail. We gave him the big laugh, for wearing a badge like that."

"What'd he do?" I was curious. "Forget that a carpenter wouldn't wear nicely shined shoes with overalls? Let a five-dollar necktie show above the mechanic's bib?"

"No. He didn't even have a necktie on, and his faded khaki shirt fitted right into the craftsman-picture. His shoes were work shoes. He'd even remembered to put a little smudge of dirt on his face and he wore one of those white cotton caps, too. What made that babe next door think there was something queer about him was that badge we ribbed him about."

"I'll bite," I said. "What badge?"

A Matter of Vanity

"Same one every last crook wears, somewhere or other. It's a matter of vanity. Except for paid droppers—the kill boys—every damn one of 'em thinks he's just about the smartest character that ever made a dishonest buck." The lieutenant's smile became broader. "Of course, I don't limit the display of vanity to criminals. I guess detectives have their share. Maybe even writers—"

"Maybe so," I agreed. "But how did a non-professional observer like this next-door neighbor spot the signs of an inflated ego on Sandor?"

The lieutenant held up his hand with his wedding-ring finger stuck out. "She thought it was funny a carpenter should work around a house wearing a two-carat diamond ring."

"Oh." I began to understand.

"Of course, no legitimate working man would wear a ring like that where it might get banged around and loosened from the setting. So the lady went back in her own apartment and gave us a buzz." He grinned broadly. "I'll take you into the cell block to see him, but if you want to get any kind of an interview, I wouldn't try any cracks about making big stones into little ones, if I were you. He'll prob'ly spit right in your eye."

—Stewart Sterling

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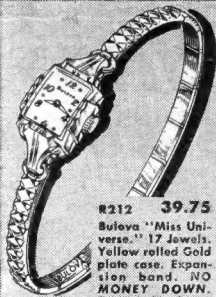
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